

My Memories of being a Royal Navy Instructor Officer

Instructor Lt Cdr Ieuan E. Roach, RN



In Malta - Instructor Lieutenant Ieuan E. Roach RN

In truth I had no idea that an amalgamation of the Schoolmaster and Instructor Officer Branches was about to take place. So my promotion to Instructor Lieutenant while serving in 45 Cdo RM at Murray Barracks, Hong Kong, came as a surprise to me and caused my hasty dash to a Chinese tailor who luckily had a small stock of braid, and ribbons of blue cloth which were needed to continue the distinguishing colour of the now enhanced Instructor Specialisation. Soon afterwards 3 Cdo Bde's tour of duty in Hong Kong ended and we embarked in the troopship SS *Strathnaver* for transit to Malta.

There followed more than two years of service at The Commando School RM, Bickleigh, on the edge of Dartmoor. My three 'Quonson' huts there included one for woodwork (more for hobbies than for serious resettlement), another for leatherworking and fabrications in perspex, and the other to be my office/study centre/library. Quonsons were made like Nissen huts but slightly taller. Good fortune introduced me to a Sergeant who was an accomplished craftsman, and he spent many long evenings motivating and helping Marines make things.

I encouraged him to consider qualifying for a commission and we raised papers to start the process. After Bickleigh, I continued friendly contact with Sergeant AD and his South African wife. Several years later, and at The Depot RM, we met again, his having been raised to Colour Sergeant, but then prepared to complete the qualification for a commission provided I did the final coaching. Success followed and, as a Direct Promotion Officer, he gained MBE (military) for bravery, and subsequently reached the rank of Major.

At that stage, late evening thugs on a deserted London Underground Platform thought him to be an easy target for theft of what they did not know was the Major's hat in the box that he carried. He eyed them left and right, chose his targets and, as they closed in on him, he dropped the box and delivered almighty elbow-thrusts justifying his Judo Black Belt. They staggered away possibly to get repairs. Although he and his wife have now passed away, as his early Instructor Officer I am jealously proud.

I recall also my first two Corps Commission Candidates to complete their year's special supervision when, as 2nd Lieutenants RM, they bought me celebratory beers on their new Officers Mess Bar-Bill at The Commando School. I view myself with an Instructor Officer's pleasure and pride over that pair too.

Completing my tour of duty at The Commando School in 1952, I started a commission at HMS *Ganges* but my old Brigadier, David Fellows, wanted me to serve in his team at the Depot RM, which my appointer eventually agreed to. So The Depot RM, Deal, Kent, would become our service base for about the next three years, though other officer-movements meant I had first to take up "waiting duty" at Royal Marines Barracks, Eastney, until the post at Deal became free. With no real duties to perform at RMB I became an officer-helper wherever the Barracks Colonel needed an extra hand.

I was then given the job of bringing up-to-date the cover-presentation of *The Globe and Laurel*, the Corps' magazine. A modern magazine cover should, so I was told, be a 'vignetted' photograph, that is an unframed image, 'bled off' over the page-edges. The first issue that appeared in that form did not arrive until I had left RMB Eastney, but I gather the opinions of 'old-and-bold' RMA Officers did cause a bit of a ruction. Although I see the present-day magazine-cover is still of the modernised style.

More serious was the committee's action, of which I was a member, in trying to get rid of the library of old volumes from RMA early days, which took up space in a first-floor library. Expert firms rejected our offer to sell, commenting that the books had no value, but they could be removed for a fee. There seemed to be a distinct policy of no-one wanting to trade in cash. Eventually we tried barter and were successful in finding a firm, whose identity I remember not, who offered to provide in exchange a table-setting of matching-style glasses for the huge mess-table in the grand Mess-Room. We accepted, and were regarded with horror by old RMA Officers, "The Blues", whenever they found the library was no longer there.

The delay in my joining The Depot ended when the Instructor Officer in post retired. Before the branches merged in 1946, Gerald Crowle had been one of the

four remaining Royal Marine Schoolmasters (Farmer, Wilkins, Cook and Crowle) who served in RM uniforms with shoulder "pips". Farmer became an Instructor Commander in a clear RN appointment as well as being The Corps Instructor Officer. Wilkins died in retired service as an Instructor Lieutenant Commander soon after being in charge of Education of Junior Ranks at The Royal Marines School of Music, also located at Deal. Cook retired (I believe) as an Instructor Lieutenant from The Barracks School at Eastney, just after I left there in about 1954. I became Crowle's relief when he ended his service as Instructor Lieutenant just before my arrival at Deal. On 10th December 1956 I "shipped" my half-stripe, by then well into my appointment as Instructor Officer in Charge at The Depot RM.



RM Depot Rugby Team 1955/6 (IER is 3rd from the left, rear row). Source: Ieuan E. Roach

From the start of my appointment there were "difficulties" with the Senior Instructor Officer of The RM School of Music. His (educational) School and my Department were adjacent in the Infirmary Area of The Depot. I retained one of the old ward buildings and the (non-music) School for Junior Musicians, together with out-buildings, were in charge of "the other side"! His commitment and staff were much larger of course than mine, and they also had to teach to a full Government Curriculum. With my small staff, I could teach Recruit-Squads, sometimes of older personnel, just what subjects I thought they would need on general duty, and I was responsible for all the mentoring required for the educational promotional needs of NCOs.

The Colonel Commanding had responsibility for both The Depot and for The School of Music via a Director of Music who, for most of his Corps time, was the famous Lt.Col. Sir Vivian Dunn, KCVO, OBE, FRSA. Medical, Dental, Administration and Quartermastering Services were shared between The Depot and The School Of Music, and the system worked well, even though both sides of the establishment had huge, independent and specialist staff-trains. The Director of Music and his staff administered and trained as many as three RM Bands at the same time. The Commanding Officer (historically "The Commandant") of The Depot had a Second-in-Command who helped administer the Corps Physical Training School, and an estate of playing fields, lawns,

parade-grounds, a large Church, a large, converted Infirmary and three full-size, Victorian Barracks, North, South and East, which were spread over much of Deal.

It was then obligatory for all CofE Marines, NCOs and Officers to attend Holy Service on Sunday mornings. In my later days there it was generally understood that Officers and their families should attend Sunday morning Church whenever they could, and in uniform with medals and sword. Beryl and I were there one Sunday morning when, at service end, the Senior Chaplain stood in the chancel with a Standard to be given with ceremony to the young girl who had been carrying it proudly for her uniformed group. The Chaplain chose the wrong spot for the lift and, raising the Standard without looking, he pierced the chancel lamp and received a small dousing of burning oil on his head and into his beard. Any lip-reader would have translated the silent cry, "B.....y Hell!" and the little girl covered.

In my days at Deal our Chaplains seemed to be specially-chosen High Church bachelors, never out of their long black buttoned soutanes. Our two seemed always to have been in office at Deal and the Mess seemed to be their home. The subalterns ribbed them unmercifully, once strewing ladies' underwear in the Senior Chaplain's Day-cabin after he had retired to bed next door. A frequent foible of his was to warn the wine-steward (a famous Steward named Fitzimmons) that he was retiring to his cabin and in 30 minutes, from the top of the stairs, he would be calling for his usual large whisky.

As soon as summer hinted itself Vivian Dunn started to organise music concerts on the lawn of South Barracks. They were popular over all South East England and those officers who had reasonable cars were drilled into providing lighting schemes around the arena whilst parked. There were extra pyrotechnics and mortars to accompany the Tchaikovsky 1812 Overture and Deal's residents seemed never to be displeased. In fact, the bands, the adjutant (mounted) leading marching troops through the town and along the shore-road, were always greeted by joyous crowds. It was rumoured that, so protective were the citizens of Deal of their Marines, that the Mayor had an arrangement with minor railway officials for an awareness signal to be sent ahead if it seemed an inspecting officer was at Charing Cross Station about to board the train for Deal.

Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother's Visit

My most interesting memory of The Depot RM, Deal, has to do with The New Block for Recruits. The plan to construct a new Block to house Corps-recruits took a long time to become a smart, new building in North Barracks, alongside the Depot's main parade ground, and it fell to Bertie Lumsden's tenure as Commandant to get finishing touches made to The Block and its surrounding flower-beds. It was to be his masterpiece,

especially as he was due to retire soon after its opening. Bertie ignored previous practice and decided he would decide who should "open" the Block. Without approval from The Admiralty Board, and in case they interfered, he invited himself to Clarence House one evening and asked if HM Queen Elizabeth, the 'Queen-Mother' would receive him. Between them, and probably over her favourite Gin and Dubonnet, and he with his favourite Plain Gin, the Queen-Mother agreed to travel to Deal and open his New Block.

Returning to Deal, Bertie set about forming a committee for the arrangement, and I was ordered to serve on the committee. "Sparks flew" in the Commandant's office as CGRM and the First Sea Lord resented being overlooked in the matter, but they could do nothing to change it. Accordingly, a royal-looking car was found and rehearsals for the Queen-Mother's arrival at Deal and her welcome from the Mayor and "Bertie". The Queen-Mother was played by Maggie, the PMO's wife. Deal stopped working because of the realism of Maggie's raised hand, and every turn and action was rehearsed and timed minutely.

Chatham Dockyard sent down a huge roll of coir mat, to be laid across the South Barracks lawn from Sergeants' Mess to the Officers' Mess. Bertie had heard that Royalty hated walking on turf in smart shoes. The Dockyard also agreed to make a dais with royal blue carpet, and Bertie made a deal at a Garden Centre for 200 or so potted geraniums to arrive to be "planted" into the imported soil of the empty flower-beds.

For our Colour-Sergeant Mess-Manager, new tail-coat, white gloves, bow-tie and shiny shoes were bought and probably paid for by Bertie Lumsden, for he was sparing no expense over his swan-song. I was lucky enough to be regarded as suitable to lunch with the Queen-Mother, and we rehearsed it three times! Firstly, with nothing on the plates or in the glasses to assess timings, secondly with dried bread and water served in order to rehearse our waiting-staff who, as for all MOAs (Marine Officer's Attendants, never called Batmen!) were General Duty Marines enjoying looking after "their blokes" instead of "yomping". The waiting-staff wore short-cut-off striped jackets and bow-ties, straight back from Mr Cavell's, the Deal Dry-Cleaners.

Rehearsal Lunch three was near the real thing, and enjoyed as the stop-watches relentlessly controlled things. Afterwards we had plenty to do in our various roles to make sure The Queen-Mother's Visit went off smoothly. In particular, her actual means of arrival was unknown to us, even at the final evening's conference in The Commandant's Office until a tubby signaller came up from SigCen, stamped his feet in salute, and said something very like, "Sir! The Queen-Mother will be biking from Manston." He was quickly sent off to get a personal line and ask for "Repeat Words Twice" and eventually he brought back, "Sir! The Queen Mother will

arrive by Viking at Manston." No helicopters, just an aeroplane of the Royal Flight, and a real royal car would be waiting at RAF Manston for the transfer.

We dispersed, in my case after I had again looked at the blue-carpeted dais, knowing that my plan to place worn pennies on the carpet to mark positions was a clever one, to be largely unseen by the crowd. I checked the bag of pennies was ready for the next morning, but hardly had I slept before I awoke completely. I was about to ask The Queen-Mother to stand on her late husband's head and the newspapers would have a field day. A true Instructor Officer is rarely away from a new stick of chalk, so I made the position marks on the pristine, new carpet. Ten minutes later they were gone. I replaced them. Again they went, but I suspected the Dockyard "matey" who was nearby with a stiff broom, and I had to ask him to become a policeman making sure no-one tried to brush off the chalk-disc-marks. They lasted the proceedings.

Band, Guard and the entire parade were perfect. Proudly, Bertie took The Queen-Mother over to the ribbon and scissors. She must have thought geraniums grew well in the Deal soil and may well have decided to mention it to the Clarence House Gardener. Drinks in the Sergeant's Mess went well. She walked to the side of the coir mat, we understand because narrow heels could be trapped. She and "Bertie" did the selected introductions outside the South Barracks Officers' Mess, including a handshake for me (below), and the Mess linen and silver looked wonderful.



HM The Queen Mother meeting Colonel B.J. Lumsden at RM Deal, and (below) the Mess Luncheon Table with The Mess Butler and Staff. Source: Ieuan E. Roach



As far as I could see the Queen-Mother ate normally, drank enjoyably and talked to those near to her and even across the table to others. Everyone behaved themselves and at the finish gathered outside to say "Goodbye" as the royal driver held open her car-door. She entered and sat, with royal wave.

The car drove slowly down the drive, through Jubilee Gate and slowly out of Deal, in order to return to Manston, "but not by bike". Maggie was hailed throughout Deal for a week. Perhaps the residents thought The Queen-Mother was staying amongst them for a holiday.

Malta and Cyprus

For myself, having searched around all three barracks to find where I'd parked our car, I was soon packing beret, belt and puttees, for another tour of duty 'at the sharp end,' this time with 40 Commando in Cyprus and Malta and occasional trips to Tarhuna and Derna in Libya. This time though it was a different tour, for I was accompanied after about a month with my wife and two children: a son of four years and a daughter of six. There followed the usual hunt for accommodation. The RN Housing Officer promised something in about two to three years' time.



Lt Cdr I.E. Roach RN in Malta with his children

As the Commando Brigade was back under Army Command the responsible Army section quickly found us a small quarter in Rabat, a front section of the old German Ambassador's house including an apse-like room under the outside double staircase. It was very sub-standard but our children liked to put out a hand to pick oranges. We were then re-allocated to an Army married quarter, also declared sub-standard, but much closer to the Barracks area.

This was ideal for a year or so until the paraffin-fed refrigerator burst into flames whilst I was on duty with 40 Cdo in Cyprus. Cooking facilities were fed from refillable gas cylinders and one had leaked in the small central yard. Being heavier than air the escaped gas had rolled silently to the refrigerator and the kitchen just blew up. Luckily Beryl was at hand and called for fire brigade assistance very quickly, shepherding the children across the road out of the way.



Lieut. (later Col) Hawley, Lt Cdr I.E. Roach and our Doctor, 40 Cdo, 1957. Source: Ieuan E. Roach

I slept on at Platres in the Troodos Mountains, for the adjutant who received the early hour's message noted, "No cause for alarm," and gave me the signal at breakfast. In the circumstances I thought a Navy type signal to Beryl was in order and I sent her a message quoting the biblical reference of Moses and the Burning Bush. This did not go down very well, nor does it still. However it meant that all Army Married Quarters in Malta were re-equipped with mains electric apparatus and the cost was enormous.

Beryl handled it as a fine naval wife and even had to go to a Maltese Court, legs not crossed, to help them find she had not been delinquent. The case went on for months, the write-off value for our Quarter being more than the General Officer Commanding (GOC)'s limit.



40 Commando's Officers in Malta, 1957 (above), CO Lt. Col. Tweed. Chaplain, Doctor and Lt Cdr I.E. Roach are mid-2nd row; below in 1959 (Chaplain and Instructor Officer in whites). Source: Ieuan E. Roach



Most of the happenings in 40 Cdo at that time, and Brigade HQ where I still had to cover that desk also, are documented elsewhere. We came home to UK as an Army family in 1960 in the *Empress of Australia* and our

children were reported for playing cards for pennies in the lounge.

Back to the UK – Yeovilton and *Ganges* (again)

The nearly three years at Yeovilton meant long days because the Station was always operational and fully manned and equipped for pretty well complete maintenance of all kinds of aircraft. The keen ratings who wanted educational advancement could only study quietly with me after tea, and they were usually keen to stay there until 2000 or so. My abiding memory of Yeovilton is that I saw my family in pyjamas when I drove away each morning, and they were similarly dressed when I returned about 2100. As well as a motor-maintenance club, expensively tooled-up, I was ordered to revive the Station's flagging interest in The Royal Navy Drama Competition. Of course, the keen Thespians wanted readings and rehearsals after they had been to tea.

The First Officer, WRNS, knew how to attract 'theatre-going' people. She and I chose to put on Benn Levy's 'Rape Of The Belt', the story of the Grecian Women who threatened to withhold their charms from their husbands. On the London Stage the principal lady would leave her bathe-pool, clutching a large towel, her grip alternating as she gesticulated and spoke her lines. Of course she wore a bathing costume underneath as a 'fail safe.' Our First Lady undertook to wear no swimming costume and would rely on good acting and firm, alternating grips on the towel. This was leaked to RNAS Yeovilton by the ticket-sellers. On the evening we had a full theatre and, although we did not win the competition we had a great deal of applause. I resolved never again to enter the RN Drama Festival.

Another memory is of being Mobilisation Officer, retaining records for all those who would be mobilised through Yeovilton should another war threaten. With a retired RN Commander, I actually exercised mobilisation of a selected number, even to welcoming them at The Gate. At the time it was a serious business but, after a few years, it was abandoned on the assumption that returnees would remember little of their particular specialisations.

Being in low gear at Yeovilton never happened despite the Appointer's well-intentioned wish. By publishing totals of successful script-results in Daily Orders (not examination passes) I found many more recruits for examination-prep., and received plaudits from the Captain. Air Days took much planning, including from me, and they seemed to "hang over us" for most of each year. So for me, and except for week-ends, pyjamas were still rig-of-the day at Discove Cottage for our children.

After Yeovilton came another draft to HMS *Ganges* at Shotley Gate. This time to be Instructor Officer in Charge of Junior Entries at The Annexe, and this time

the commission ran for a full 2+ years. It was a bit of "a factory" of early personality-moulding and, with an Instructor Lieutenant to help, we tried to make "the factory" as human as possible. As a rule, families were pleased with the initial results. Arrival and Departure photographs really showed parents that most of their boys benefited from discipline and good food. I used what were then novel Overhead Projector slides to revise the Mathematics and English which we hoped the State Schools had already taught our new recruits. We tried to make up for some of the State's failings.

As for my own comfort, I made the mistake of making a really good job of typing and having printed the individual reports on each Junior, made an analysis of each batch of entrants, and comparisons with previous batches. The Instructor Captain and The Captain looked forward to getting these as soon as a new batch of Juniors, usually 50 to 100 at a time, marched behind the establishment band through the main gate of HMS *Ganges*.

I was always impressed when Captain Godfrey Place, VC, in borrowed admiralty-civilian-jacket drove the bus from Ipswich Railway Station with unsuspecting 16yr old newcomers behind him as passengers, expressing aloud their fears of The Navy and being away from home for the first time. We were under orders never to salute or recognise the Captain as he unloaded his passengers into our care. Nor did I ever hear him gossip about the private remarks he overheard in that bus.

I was glad to move on to Portsmouth in due course, especially as it meant resuming family life. Retirement continues to be, 'Another Life.'

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