

# My Life and Times

By E D Palfrey - S.B.No. 3469  
 D. O B. 15<sup>th</sup> August 1924  
 at Bratton Clovelly,  
 near Orkhampton Devon,  
 Trained in T.S.Warspite 1938-39  
 until approximately 23<sup>rd</sup>. September 1939

Firstly, having walked over two miles to North Tawton Station, I boarded a train alone to travel to London. It was my first time on a train and, very fortunately for me, got talking to an elderly lady, who obviously took pity on me and took me to the Marine Societies' Bishops gate office. I was very grateful for this help and kindness.

Having been accepted for the Training Ship etc., we were taken to Fenchurch Railway Station on route to Gray's.

Aboard T.S.Warspite everything was very strange to me and at first it was not the happiest of times. In later years I appreciated the invaluable training which I received on board. I now have many memories of life aboard the ship.

As a member of the `Main Top Division`, I recall having to scrub the `Main Top Spare Deck`, which was roped off and no-one dared to walk on it. We scrubbed it on hands and knees' every morning, having first scrubbed the upper deck in bare feet, which in winter was very painful. When no-one was looking, we used to warm our feet on a very large tank. This was followed by a shower and often the water wasn't very hot. The day started early, about 5.30am I think, and the day was full. At 9.00pm there was a muster of all boys on the lovely clean deck that we had scrubbed earlier. The `Main Top Spare Deck` was the `Sacred` deck used then. Each boy in sequence of S.B. Nos., would step up before `Captain Bayley` and state his name and his S.B. No. holding up:

Mondays	a toothbrush
Tuesdays	a pair of white shoes
Wednesdays	a pair of brown canvas shoes
Thursdays	a pair of black shoes
Fridays	a clean towel
Saturdays	give his name & S.B. No. only

I have since learnt, the purpose was to check if anyone was missing. There never was.

Sport was played every afternoon. I think I played hockey once, but was then put to run in the Cross Country every day, either the longer route along the river bank to Tilbury Docks or the shorter route back along the railway which was about 3 1/2 miles along a disused track.

It seemed to always be bitterly cold and wet.

I was described by Captain Bayley in his customary `green ink`, as a `westo`. I had no knowledge of Sport. My exercise before had been a long walk to school and back every weekday, to school on a Saturday to care for the greenhouse, and to Sunday school every Sunday and also sometimes on a Sunday evening with my mother to the Methodist chapel.

On the occasion someone had to receive `Cuts` as a punishment, the latest intake of `boys` were made to `witness` the punishment meted out by Mr. Ted Witherden. A box horse was used to spread-eagle the culprit while the `cuts` were given slowly on bare buttocks, which was a rare happening, the boy concerned did not enjoy the experience.

Work-ship parties were formed among the older boys and one such task was whalers' crew for a week, which was fine in summer but not so good in winter. It was the only time I knew when the bow rope was a chain. On an ebb tide the jetty would be very slippery for the bowman to land on. On one occasion I remember the boats' crew allowed a basket of bread to fall into the river. No doubt it still got eaten.

Coaling ship happened twice during my `sojourn` on board. Plenty of boys volunteered to go in the `lighter` to shovel the coal. They seemed to enjoy getting `black`. My job was to hoist with others, each load from the `lighter` and there were over 90 tons to move. Loading ship was a day to remember.

I remember on one occasion being taken with a group of boys to `The Valley Charlton Athletics` football ground to see a game – my first time ever! and another time to `The Royal Tournament` (1939?). We also went to `Billericay` for a fete and was in `Mr. Bud Abbots` team to perform the Hornpipe which he had taught us.

I remember vividly the oilskins we had to wear on leave, they were very old and we had to pick one from a pile of black, sticky oilskins which appeared never to be hung up. As a junior we had what was left.

When our hammocks were lashed up we always had to stow them in the nettings on the upper deck, fine in summer but not in winter.

Food was not good and was served on a tin plate with tin mugs for the tea, known as a `spare`.

At home, being the 3<sup>rd</sup> eldest of seven, we were very poor, so I probably felt the change less than the rest. I had had no say in going to the training ship Warspite. It was the done thing in the 1930`s and a career in the Services was considered more secure in those days. It was certainly the means to me having a very successful and interesting two careers in my time.

While on board, I had German measles and was transferred to the `sick quarters` onshore. It was `heaven` compared to ship-borne life. The boys sometimes ate soap to give themselves `high temperatures`, ` thus getting themselves a few days in the sick quarters or sick bay.

On September 3<sup>rd</sup>. 1939, we were all assembled on the upper deck to hear the Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlains' speech declaring War on Germany.

Almost immediately the P & O liners at Tilbury docks had their buff funnels and light colours painted out with dark grey. There was much excitement among the boys. In those days many Blue Star liners and other ships used the river and the Port of London, and it was a favourite pastime to watch them in the evenings. Often, after War was declared, we heard that the very liner we had watched leave London would be announced as `sunk` a few days later.

We were all sent home about 3 weeks later as the Marine Society considered it imprudent to have the boys on-board ship since German planes had flown a number of reconnaissance flights over the Thames.

In the letter to parents, which was a considerably strongly worded reminder that every boy trained in the ship would join the R.N., R.M., or M.N. subsequently.

On the very morning that I left home early to travel by train to Bristol, a telegram arrived in the post from the Adjutant of the Royal Marines at Plymouth, to summon me to go to Plymouth, to be an R.M. bugler. However, I was already on the train and joined the R.N., on October 17<sup>th</sup>. 1939, arriving later that day at the `Annexe` to H.M.S. Ganges which was considered a `tough` place, but after a year in T.S. Warspite, it was easy.

In the Annexe we all got our new kit into which we had to sew our names. There was parade drill and various vaccinations and inoculations plus an early call around 5.30am. One morning, whilst racing across the

parade ground to have a cup of early morning cocoa, I leapt across a large rainwater ditch into a post at the side of the colonnade. I suffered concussion but never made the same mistake ever again in the darkness. I was pleased to move to the main barracks after six weeks but still suffering the effects of my third TAB injection.

One evening, soon after moving to the main barracks, the air raid siren sent everybody rushing to the shelter. I was still nursing a very swollen arm, and at the shelter entrance I fell, and ended up in the sick quarters at H.M.S. Ganges. In the night about 2 am, I was awakened to see a number of 'black men' being brought in. They were covered in oil and it transpired that they were all survivors from S.S. Simon Belivar, and were covered in black oil as a result of the sinking. She was the first ship sunk off Harwich during the war. Later, we had some bodies from H.M.S. Gipsy brought into H.M.S. Ganges and I remember it had been hit by a mine I think, and the reality of war was brought home to us then.

At 'Colours', with the boys all at 'Divisions' on the parade ground, the band would play the National Anthem. As each country followed us into war, that countries' anthem would follow ours and after a few days they were reduced to just ours, plus one other, in rotation. Meanwhile, the class who were to go over the mast had to climb the mast whilst the parade was present.

In March 1940, our class (202) was transferred to H.M.S. Impregnable at Bull point, St Budeaux, Plymouth, which was the result of air activity over Ganges. Some classes went to Isle of Mann and the barracks at H.M.S. Ganges became empty. By then we were spending all day and night in the shelter under the parade ground and it was decided to transfer us to the Isle of Mann to complete our training. School here was at a normal school at Ballachernia, about 1 1/2 – 2 miles away. It was quite a march to and from school.

We finished our training in February 1941 and the Devonport ratings went to Glen Holt Camp at Roborough, outside Plymouth in Devon. The blitz on Plymouth commenced soon after, and all the boys awaiting draft were employed in aiding the civil population in street clearing, (that's when I had my First ever pint when a Landlord of a bombed pub near St. Andrews Church (central Plymouth) had some beer he was unable to then sell). We were also engaged in moving household effects from bombed out houses, often to Plymouth Argyle's Football Stadiums' covered stand. We were allocated to an R.A.F. lorry which was sent from Bedford. Four boys were allocated to a lorry and we were kept busy. We had almost completely filled the stand when German planes bombed it one night and set fire to it. On the same night they badly damaged the

nearby bus depot and we saw buses that had been blown onto the roof of the depot, next day. At night the boys kept either armed sentry duty at the gate or patrolled the woods around the camp.

The boys were being drafted to ships throughout my time at Glen Holt until 7<sup>th</sup> May, which was the time occasioned by the time taken for the admiralty to obtain written permission for me to serve on H.M.S. Norfolk with my older brother Tom Palfrey. Before leaving Plymouth a large number of boys were engaged on a Saturday morning in removing the earth from some unexploded bombs at Plymstock. There were 8 or 9 500lbs bombs dropped, one very close to the church and the others across at an adjoining orchard. They had entered the soft ground leaving a clean hole in doing so. The idea was for us to remove the soil and the bomb disposal team from H.M.S. Defiance would then defuse them. For 16 year olds this was a very unusual occupation but despite our obvious fears it proved uneventful.

It was expected that our lunchtime meal would be sent, but this did not happen, and at about 2.30 pm the officer in charge ordered us to return by lorries to the camp at Glen Holt.

During most of the morning it had rained heavily making most of the area become a quagmire, which made it impossible to see where the bombs had entered. I often wondered who completed the job but we were never involved thereafter. I understand the whole area has since been developed.

On the 7<sup>th</sup> of May 1941, I travelled in a very crowded steam train to Thurso, on the North coast of Scotland, and boarded the steamer St. Ninian enroute to Scapa Flow. All Norfolk's joiners were then told to leave the ferry and, with their kit, board the train south. We were going to Rosythe, where we later learned, that having been repaired following a 1,000 lbs. Bomb hit on the Norfolk in Scapa Flow, the ship was now repaired and ready for sea.

We soon left for Scapa Flow for gun trials, etc., and then to the Denmark straits patrol, later to be joined by H.M.S. Suffolk.

My first operational sea trip was soon to become a nightmare, when on 23<sup>rd</sup>. may, H.M.S. Suffolk sighted the worlds' largest and most powerful German battleship, Battleship Bismarck, and a Cruiser, Prinz Eugen, reported them to us as the senior officer.

At about 7.30pm we emerged from the fog to see the Bismarck about 6 miles away. We were fired on by 5 salvos of 8 – 15 inch shells, all of which miraculously missed with only pieces of shrapnel landing onboard to damage one steel ladder. Next morning at 5.45am our largest warship H.M.S. Hood took a direct hit and was blown up.

Some 4 days of shadowing followed and excess speed caused very severe vibration throughout. We were given the slip once. Many other ships were involved throughout the chase but only two were involved throughout the chase, the H.M.S. Norfolk and the Bismarck. The Bismarck was finally disabled by airborne torpedo, and sunk after severe bombardment on 27<sup>th</sup> of May, around 11.00am whilst on her maiden voyage. The British ships involved were all short on fuel and had to return conserving what they had left. It may seem strange but most of our sailors felt very sorry for the German crew, to see what was a beautiful, modern ship (for its time) destroyed especially on its maiden voyage, seemed unbelievable.

Only 136 German survivors were saved by H.M.S. Dorsetshire from a total of 2,100 crew.

Our next trip was to escort a few troop ship convoys as far as West Africa en route to the Far East via Cape Town. We went into Freetown to return the 365 U-Boat prisoners from H.M.S. London to the Clyde. Some were very young indeed.

H.M.S. Norfolk was next involved in escorting PQ 2, the second convoy of the war to Archangel. It was a very cold, but uneventful trip. Apart from supporting the invasion of North Africa in November 1942, the ship spent the whole time in the artic escorting various convoys to or from North Russia including the infamous convoy PQ 17 in July 1942.

The admiralty, thinking that the German battleship Tirpitz and her escorts were at sea, ordered the escorts of the convoy to withdraw to the westward at high speed and the convoy scattered. This resulted in most of the ships being sunk. Even our walrus Amphibian plane was abandoned and, fortunately, managed to alight near to a ship to be towed to Russia eventually.

Relatively few of those involved would have received the Arctic Star emblem, which was awarded to those who qualified for it by serving in the convoy escorts to or from Russia. I actually received one last year (2006) and, later as a dependant, one for my late brother who served in the same ship. The Russian government awarded me with their commemorative medal to mark 40 years since the defeat of the fascists also.

I left H.M.S. Norfolk after she returned from North Africa after the invasion. While in Devonport awaiting a draft for my next ship, I qualified as a Leading Signaller.

In march 1943 I joined ACV22 (later H.M.S. Searcher) at Portland, Oregon, U.S.A. It was a converted merchant ship, an aircraft carrier which carried about 20 fighter aircraft.

We had a motley crew made up of T124X ratings who had signed up to serve with the R.N., mainly the engine room personnel and most of the others were Hostilities. Only ratings with very few active service or regulars in the R.N.

Most officers were R.N.R. or R.N.V.R. and the pilots who were very young including `rating` pilots.

We all enjoyed Portland, known as the `City of Roses`. People in the U.S.A. were so hospitable

My first job in the ship was `Postie`, and I collected the mail from the British Consulate in the city. In naval uniform every car was happy to see you and give you a lift (and a meal also) to have ones company for a while. Everyone was so kind.

Although I did not know him, the person who, much later, became the Marine Societies' Education Officer, Richard Pope, was onboard the ship as a signalman; one had no chance to know many of those on board.

The ship was employed mainly in the North Sea area, attacking coastal craft off Norway, etc., and providing fighter cover for naval aircraft attacking the battleship Tirpitz without much success. After leaving the U.K. en route to join the Pacific Fleet via the Panama Canal the ship experienced mountainous seas over the Christmas Day and Boxing Day 1944 and, later, when about 600 miles from the U.S. a failure of the main engines caused the ship to stop for 4 days in very calm seas. We all cheered up when two small escort ships arrived and circled the ship.

We were very lucky that no U-Boat had appeared.

We then proceeded to Hoboken, New Jersey for repairs to the engines, which lasted for six weeks, only to find that luck was still with us and our future was to involve our planes attacking bridges in the South of France. Operations against shipping off Norway were soon to follow until V.E. Day, spent in Scapa Flow.

Afterwards we were sent via Suez to the East Indies Station and had the privilege of embarking at Rangoon, where the first batch of repatriated prisoners of war, and internees were to be brought out of Burma. We also landed 600 French Marines in Rangoon from Ceylon.

There were 365 returning P.O.W.s', and half were British, mainly Scottish, and half of the remainder were Indian. The latter were especially badly treated by the Japanese and almost every one had lost a limb whilst in captivity. They were all glad to be onboard, even though

accommodated on camp beds in the ships hanger. It was a rough few days to Madras, India, where they were all disembarked. Their first meal on board was Curry & Rice.

V.J.Day, 15<sup>th</sup> August 1945, was my 21<sup>st</sup>. Birthday, and, as was the custom then, I was `relieved` early at noon and was given many `sippers` of Pusser`s Navy Rum by many of my messmates. Whilst sleeping off the effects, I was awakened at 5.30pm to be told that the officers Wardroom Mess would entertain all C.P.O.s` and P.O.s` at 6.00pm to celebrate the End of the War. As it was my 21<sup>st</sup>. Birthday I was expected to attend, so, reluctantly, I went along but would only have beer, which I later learned was the most expensive drink and never requested. However it was a most memorable occasion and enjoyed by all.

Having joined as a signalman in early 1943, I had qualified as a Leading Signalman and then passed for Yeoman of Signals in January 1945, at the ripe old age of 20, I was indeed very fortunate, when the Chief Yeoman was drafted to teach at the Bombay Signal school, to find that at the end of August 1945 I was to become the Acting Chief Yeoman of Signals and was moved to the C.P.O.s` Mess, which was quite a change after being a member of a large mess of 147 Petty Officers. I stayed aboard while the ship was returned to New York in December 1945 and returned in the liner Queen Mary to Southampton.

Various drafts followed. The first to the Petty Officers School at Corsham, where Lieut. Philip Mountbatten was serving as a Course Officer. I can well remember him leaving in his green M.G. car to see Princess Elizabeth, (now our Queen) on a Friday afternoon. That was a long time ago and he has now become well known as Prince Philip since then.

From there I went to H.M.S. Scotia at the former Butlins holiday Camp at Ayr Scotland, as an instructor of signals, and then transferred to Leigh, near Warrington.

In July 1947 onboard the troopship Strathnaver, I went to Hong Kong to the Combined Services H.Q. on cryptographic duties but the following August swapped with a Yeoman onboard H.M.S. London where I became the Staff yeoman. Again employed on cryptographic duties. For me it was a particular busy and interesting time.

The highlight of the commission was the Yangtse Incident involving H.M. ships Amethyst, Consort, London, and Black Swan. We were all very grateful that a U.S. hospital ship, Repose, was near by and took onboard most of the injured.

When 'Amethyst', was still being held by the Communists, my ship London went to Singapore  
 And I was loaned to the C in Cs' H.Q at Phoenix Park to work in cryptography, whilst H.M.S. London went on a cruise to the Philippines. Thus I was able to follow the 'Amethyst' saga throughout. On our return to Chatham, in September 1949, I was sent with twelve others to our home depot at Devonport, Plymouth.  
 The following year I was transferred to the South African Navy as an Instructor of Signals. Lovely !

From December 1952 I saw service in H.M.S. Illustrious, the trials and training carrier serving all naval stations in the UK. We seemed always to be at sea and perhaps the most dramatic time was when in a very rough sea, a large tanker had broken into two and Illustrious steamed between both parts immediately thereafter. That was when all witnessed the wonderful brave lifeboat crews trying to rescue the tankers crew. The two lifeboats were from St Davids in Wales and Rosslare in Southern Ireland. The latter having to be towed into Liverpool being out of fuel after 36 hours in a very rough Irish sea.

Next was H.M.S. Flamingo, which we re-commissioned by air to Bahrain. She was Senior Naval Officer Persian Gulf, i.e. sweltering climate with very few breaks.  
 We went everywhere in the Gulf and, for a break from the hot weather went to Basra, Iraq and tied up to the R.A.F. jetty at Margill. Being very close to the Sgt's Mess, we had a whale of a time there.  
 We salvaged R.F.A. Wave King with a lot of fuel onboard. Six days effort qualified me as a Chief Yeoman for the princely sum of just under eleven shillings in salvage money.  
 We were the first R.N. ship to visit Abadan, following the period of Dr. Mossadeos' reign and we were all welcomed by the Persians (now Iran). Many went on a tour of the Abadan oil refinery; a most interesting experience indeed. The oil arrived by pipes direct from the desert, which was refined and came out in square drums, manufactured in the refinery at the seaward end. The total number of drums that day was nearly 90,000 I think. The filled drums were taken out by 'lighter' to the ship anchored offshore.

After a period at H.M.S. Impregnable at Devonport, where I was employed as an instructor, I next went to Singapore by air to re-commission H.M.S. Newfoundland and visited Japan and Hong Kong, and led various naval exercises there.  
 The highlight of this 18 month trip was intended to be a cruise of 13 ports in Australia which, sadly after leaving Freemantle and approaching

Melbourne, we were ordered back to Singapore to take on war stores then to proceed to the Persian Gulf because of the `Kuwait` emergency. After six weeks at anchor off Bahrain we were relieved and, as morale was low, sent to Japan.

Returning to the U.K. by air for the Instructor's Course in 1959 at H.M.S. Mercury, which was successful, the privilege of being the course instructor for the following course was given to me, an honour indeed. My next job was being posted to Malta for two years and three months, again as an instructor at the Joint Tactical School and Signal training Centre. It was hard work especially in the summer, when teaching from 7.30am until 1.30pm, but most enjoyable. My family travelled to Malta with me at this rare time .

My last ship in the Royal Navy was the Commando Troop Carrier H.M.S. Albion, which we re-commissioned in Portsmouth, and sailed via Suez to the Far East calling at Aden during the `trouble` there. Afterwards we mainly spent our time transporting various Commandos and Army Units from Malaysia to Borneo during the `Confrontation`.

It was a wonderful experience to visit so many places that I had never been to before, and to be part of the ship often described as `the most useful` on the `Station`.

At the end of that `Commission`, I was selected to become part of the `2<sup>nd</sup>. Sea Lords Presentation Team,` also `Treasurer of the Royal Benevolent Fund` but, regrettably , had to decline both, for family reasons.

My final appointment in the Royal Navy was as `President of the C.P.Os' Mess and `Seniors Class Instructor`.

On leaving the Royal Navy on 29<sup>th</sup>. April 1968, instead of taking terminal leave, I started my second career at the `House of Commons` on 1<sup>st</sup>. April 1968 as a `Doorkeeper`.

The first very unusual event was that the two most junior doorkeepers were sent to work in the `Members Post Office during what was expected to be a two day strike but turned out to be 7 and 1/2 weeks. Lorries and vans brought avalanches of mail for delivery to M.P's free. And we later had ten doorkeepers working there, eight of them upstairs in the sorting office. At this time I became involved in forming the `Royal Naval Chiefs Association` and was elected `No 1` and the `Chairman of the Committee`. We now have nearly 1,200 members including many officers so the organisation has thrived beyond any ones imagination.

With ten years as `Chairman`, followed by ten years as `Honourable Secretary` then a period as `Vice Chairman`, I have now resigned from the Committee after 32 years and now enjoy reading the twice yearly newsletter instead.

Promotion soon followed at the `House of Commons` and both `strike-breakers` were given jobs as clerks in the Admission Office. It was a very high profile job and very busy and interesting too which enabled me to meet many interesting people. As a result, my wife and I were invited to attend two Garden Parties at `Buckingham Palace`. At the first we were presented to the `Queen Mother` and at the second to her Majesty The Queen. These were very memorable events. We also attended the `Inspection of the Queens Bodyguard` by Her Majesty on two occasions. During my time at the `House of Commons` I was told about the T.S. Warspite Reunions held by The Marine Society and my wife and I have since attended many. Sadly, I am afraid my health prevented me from attending this year (2007).

The Imperial War Museum held a meeting to commemorate the `60th Anniversary of the Sinking of the Bismarck` and some of the crews of the ships mainly involved were invited to attend. As a former signal boy at that historic occasion, I was interviewed by Channel Four Television and later appeared very briefly in a film about Bismarck. The Marine Society very kindly allowed us to hold the camera interview in the Directors Room.

Some time later, when a book on the sinking of H.M.S. Hood and K.M.S. Bismarck was launched at the Imperial war Museum, some of us were invited to attend.

It was the only time that I have experienced when the young driver of the taxi from Waterloo to the Museum refused any payment from us for transporting us. His father had served in the 8<sup>th</sup> Army at Alamein. Subsequently, as a result of The Imperial war Museums' interest, I was asked to have a `taped interview` for the benefit of schools, museums, etc. . This was held in 2002 and included my early life followed by my `Warspite` training, my service with the Royal Navy, and also my second career in the `House of Commons`. The lady interviewer was most interested in my tale.

In 2005 a Navy News question was asked by a Mrs Martin ``is there anyone still around who knew `Bandy Pitt` of the T.S. Warspite ?`

I responded and was the only person to do so. Apparently her father served on board but although I recalled names of the ships Officers I could not recall her father. As Mrs. Martin was elderly and very poorly sighted, a friend of hers, Mrs. Simmonds, assisted her and she wrote a booklet ``Less We Forget``, of which she kindly gave me a copy. It is most interesting too.

Throughout my life I have only ever met two ex T.S. Warspite boys. The first was the Chief Instructor at the South African Navy and Sea Cadets, Johannesburg base in 1951. He later became an Officer in the R.N. and was presented with the Marine Societies sword. We were good friends until he passed away some years ago and, of course, his widow and three sons are good friends of mine still. He was Lieutenant F.J. Bell and was in Warspite in about 1936 I believe.

The second was Bill Pinney, whom I met in hospital at Portsmouth when his wife and mine, Betty, were patients there. By arrangement I brought he and his wife to one reunion in 1997, but he passed away the following year. Apparently he had served in the R.N. but was also a leading light in the Portsmouth Burma Star Association.

Although it may not have been the happiest year of my life, there is no doubt that the Training onboard T.S. Warspite gave me an excellent start to a very happy and useful life. To say that I have been very lucky too, would be an understatement if ever there was one.

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