

ADOLESCENCE TO MANHOOD

I was fourteen years old when I left the school at Bisley to venture out into the commercial world of 1941. My first job was with an advertising agency, T C Bench who specialised in promoting pharmaceutical companies together with the clothing company Ambrose Wilson. The company was located in Tudor Street, Blackfriars, in London and at Hampton Wick. The Tudor Street office ran a small staff that was subjected to losing personnel being called up for military service or government reserved occupations and I soon became quite an important cog in the organisation. Much of the work involved verification that advertisements had appeared in national and provincial newspapers and being close to Fleet Street entailed collection and delivery of voucher copies in support of customer accounts. I started work for two pounds fifty pence per week, which at that time was considered quite generous pay. However, my accommodation and meals cost two pounds per week leaving me with only fifty pence to pay my fares to and from work, National Insurance contribution of four pence, and spending money! As the fares amounted to six pence per day for a five-day week that spending money left me with just forty-six pence.

Youngsters under the call-up age of eighteen had to join a youth organisation and I chose the Air Cadets. When it was known of my musical background I was asked if I would organise a band from among the other members of the Cadet corps. As time was very restricted I suggested the formation of a bugle band and helped a few interested cadets to learn to play the bugle. Within three months we had a bugle band supporting the Air Cadets at various civil functions. Among the membership of the Air Cadets was a lad named Henry Shalofski, whose mother was Polish. He was a keen jazz trumpeter who busked and could not read musical scores, so he introduced me to jazz and I joined him in a Youth Jazz Assemble. In turn I helped him to read music. Henry took the professional stage name of Hank Shaw and became a prominent and well-known be-bop trumpeter. Also in the Jazz Assemble was tenor saxophonist, Ronnie Scott, again another musician who did not read music but went on to become famous in jazz circles centred on Soho, in London.

I started to play in various semi-professional dance bands in the evenings which was financially very rewarding and enabled me to buy clothes and pay for all the extra things I had only dreamed about.

As my office was located in Tudor Street the tenancy enabled staff there to use the canteen facilities at the top of the building round the corner in New Bridge Street and it was here I first fell eyes on a beautiful long haired brunette. She worked as a telephonist for L S Dixon, the paper merchants who occupied offices there. I was sixteen years old and tried to get a message to her in the hope of meeting her but in my naïve clumsy way got her name wrong. She was Alice, very shy and demur, but she agreed to say hello, and this was the start of our love affair. Alice was a year younger than me, had endured a tough upbringing in Bermondsey, losing her father at the age of three, and was often at loggerheads with her step-father. I introduced Alice to Cliff, my brother who was a Flight Engineer training on a Lancaster bomber in early May 1943 and I believe he was very pleased that

Alice and I had found each other. We enjoyed several social occasions with Cliff and his wife Rose. Cliff telephoned Alice at work calling her 'Honeybunch' and Alice loved Cliff's happy and seemingly care-free life-style, hoping I would become less serious like my brother. But then, tragedy struck. Cliff was killed in an air accident on November 10, 1943. Two Lancasters collided over Dunholme in Lincolnshire when Cliff's plane was on its final night hop over Britain before going into action over Germany. I was heartbroken, as Cliff meant everything to me – he was brother, mother, father, all wrapped in one. It made me feel so lonely but I had Alice by me and I think that drew us both closer together.

At seventeen years old I volunteered to join the RAF for aircrews but my sight was not good enough so I waited for my call-up at eighteen and joined the Royal Navy.

My naval training involved organising skills and I was first posted to the Fleet Arm but as they were fully staffed transferred me back to Chatham Dockyard to await posting elsewhere. My training involved organising and administration of naval stores, with emphasis on victualling and messtraps (clothing and catering facilities).

I put in a request for marriage leave whilst I was stationed at Chatham and was given an extra 24 hours on a long weekend (Friday to Monday) pass. Alice and I were married on December 1st 1945 at St Augustine's Church in Bermondsey and on my return to Chatham on the Tuesday I was summoned instantly to report to the 'Master at Arms, Foreign Section' and given fourteen day foreign embarkation leave. On my return home Alice's first remark was 'I thought they may give you more marriage leave, but not this'. However, on my return to Chatham I was posted to Blackwall Dock on the north side of the Thames to join HMS 'Sharpshooter' which was undergoing a refit from minesweeper to survey ship. I became a member of the skeleton crew that was to equip the ship before venturing off to the Far East to undertake survey work, particularly in the clear up at the end of the Second World War. This was an interesting post as the ship was an 'Independent Command Vessel' and had to cater for 120 crew for periods of up to three months unaided. I was put in charge of the victualling and messtraps which kept me fully engaged. The ship was fitted out with the very latest sonar and radar equipment and stripped of all armament. On completion of the refit the ship was towed into the Thames to proceed downstream when it collided with barges heading upstream. This meant that the ship had to be towed down to an anchorage point and be inspected for damage before proceeding on sea trials. The delays that resulted gave me the opportunity to see Alice more than I would have been able to normally, so we took full advantage of this situation with evening visits to Bermondsey and very early recalls to the ship.

After the sea trials we headed for Singapore, via the Suez Canal and began our first survey in the Indian Ocean at the port of Mergui in Burma. Although the war in the Pacific was over the people in Burma were starving and some Japanese who were unaware of the war ending caused problems in the jungle. Allied aircraft dropped food supplies which were often gathered by the Japanese. This was compounded by the action of a Japanese minelayer which dropped all its mines in the approaches to the port of Mergui without disclosing what they had done,

before sailing down to Penang and surrendering. Food ships that tried to enter the port were mined and it befell our lot to locate and mark the wrecks, whilst Canadian flat bottomed minesweepers were called in to sweep the area. Fifty two mines were swept and destroyed and we located twelve wrecks. It took us ten days to complete the survey before heading off to Penang and Singapore. We tried to locate where the 'Prince of Wales' battleship had reportedly sunk in the Pacific Ocean, but without success and after a couple of brief surveys off the coast of Siam and Malaya our main work was in Borneo and Sarawak. After two years service I was due for demobilisation and returned home from Singapore on a troopship. So, I returned as a man.

Berney Baughen

copyright November 2012