**CONWAY RECOLLECTIONS David Burdett**

I was born in June 1939. After WWI my older cousin served for several years in the Royal Navy. His parents had died early so my parents looked after him as a teenager and he used to stay with us from time to time. He told me some of his experiences and gave me a drawing of an air-sea rescue launch. So, from about the age of eleven, if anybody asked me what I was going to do when I grew up I would say that I wanted to go to sea. In reality I had no idea what that meant. However my father took me at my word and enquired about my going to Dartmouth to join the Royal Navy only to be told that the thirteen-year-old entry had been discontinued. In later years I was grateful for this stroke of good fortune as I saw it.

Thanks to a wealthy uncle who was a banker in the far east I became a pupil at Bedford Grammar School in the summer of 1948. One day I heard that a fellow pupil, Hugh Perks, was leaving to go to the training ship HMS Conway. I mentioned it to my father and in the Spring of 1954, during the Easter holidays, found myself on a train to Bangor for an interview. I am cynical enough to think that, provided the parents could afford to pay the fees, candidates would be accepted unless they were a completely hopeless case. Despite the fact that my school reports showed I was not particularly bright, I also believe that a public school education did count. However the most important thing I did was to say that I was in the Boy Scouts and played rugby football. Whatever the reasons, I was accepted and in September headed back to Anglesey feeling somewhat embarrassed sitting in the train in my brand new uniform just hoping nobody would ask me any questions about seafaring.

There was so much clothing of uniform styling that one's parents had to provide that it was usually sent “luggage in advance” by rail and was delivered from Bangor station to the ship. Every item of clothing had to be identified so we were given numbers. I was Conway cadet number 566. Every time you got dressed this number would pass before your eyes so that it became indelibly printed in ones memory. For many years after leaving the Ship I kept the linen laundry bag that we filled every week. The laundry contract must have been worth quite a lot. I remember wearing detachable starched collars at Bedford school but I cannot recall whether this was the case at the Conway. I recall that we had semi-stiff collars for everyday wear as they were more comfortable and stiff collars for formal occasions. That would have been Sunday Divisions.

My contribution towards the success of the Forecastle (Fxl) Division gig racing crew stemmed from my time at Bedford School. What I enjoyed most of my sporting activities there was to row in a school eight on the river Ouse. There was a major difference between an eight and a gig. Eights have sliding seats that allow the oarsmen to move back and forth easily as they use their legs as well as arms for maximum effort. Gigs have fixed wooden planks to sit on. By the end of a half mile race in a gig the cheeks of my backside would be bleeding. The things we did for our Top (Division) !

The following letters were found in a box in our attic in the winter of 2010/11, 55 years after they were written. When I joined the Conway my parents were living in Bedford but in 1955 my father was promoted to Area Organiser for south-east England for the RNIB and they moved to Lancing on the south coast. The upheaval of the move probably accounts for the loss of correspondence between November 1953 and October 1954. It was after the move to Sussex that I became friends with Johnny Dovell, another cadet who lived in Worthing.

The contents of these letters are rather monotonous with just the odd entertaining comment. Despite appearances I am not an alcoholic. It is just that, from my early teens, my father and I would share a bottle of beer during our Sunday lunch and I developed a liking for the brew. At the Conway smoking seemed to be the addiction that was regarded as serious. I was fortunate in that my parents did not smoke, well my father had been invalided out of the RAF with Tuberculosis, so I did not indulge until I had been at sea for some time.

My choice of a shipping company trading to Australia stemmed from the fact that another uncle and his family had emigrated to Melbourne to work at the ICI offices there. I eventually chose to apply to Port line through snobbishness. The Conway was supported by the owners of the Blue Funnel line so it was easy to get an apprenticeship with them or one of the other Liverpool shipping companies. It was more difficult to get into a London company because they were more familiar with the output of HMS Worcester. The other advantage of working for a London based company was that, living on the south coast, it was nearer home when the ships were working cargo in their “home” port. There was an unexpected advantage in working for Port Line. I came out of my apprenticeship as the ship I was serving on arrived in Australia. I got permission to stay with my aunt and uncle while I studied for three weeks at the Melbourne College of Technology before sitting for, and passing, the Second Mate's exam. The company gave me a £50 bonus for that – well it had saved them several month's study leave pay.

Getting back to my time at the Conway. I do not think I intentionally set out to be away from the ship as much as possible but once I became involved in away fixtures for rugby, athletics or gymnastics matches or scouting in Llanberis I did enjoy the travelling around north Wales and beyond. There was, as in any group of youngsters, only a small percentage of cadets who were interested in gymnastics but it was a favourite sport of T.E.W.Brown, the Head Master (commonly referred to as Tewb). He was an accomplished gymnast himself and, by running a gym team, it gave him an excuse to participate himself as a way to keep fit. There were the obvious comments from other cadets but it did not worry us as we knew they were only jealous when they saw us disappearing out of the gates again. The reference to Lilleshall in February 1956 relates to a weekend course Tewb arranged for the gym team at the national gymnastics training centre. I do not think that there was ever any chance that we would win a gym competition. It may have been this that persuaded Tewb to organise the weekend in the hope that we might put up a better show on behalf of the Ship. It seems that the only thing the weekend did was to show that we were not fit.

Tewb was a great character whose main interest was in helping youngsters to develop and make the most of themselves. It must have taken a lot of effort running and maintaining life for about 150 cadets on board a wooden-wall ship anchored out in the stream. One has heard many stories of the regular work of the motorboats and their crews. While the wrecking of the Ship was a great historical loss I believe Tewb saw it as an opportunity to improve the education of the cadets to suit them to a seafaring way of life that was steadily becoming more technical. It was quite an accolade to the staff that they were allowed to set and mark examinations that could give a cadet an entry to university if they added an A-level pass in a classical subject. That was the status of the Conway Extra Certificate.

My first term was spent in Nestor dormitory at the House. “Winkle” was our House Divisional officer who was also a seamanship instructor with Mr Drake. While the educational subjects were getting more technical, seamanship was still important. I recall as an apprentice on a Port Line ship having to bend on the signal flags prior to our departure from some port. Subsequently one of the flags fell to the deck leaving an unusable halyard on the triatic stay. The third mate summoned me to the bridge and told be off for my seamanship saying that he was not impressed by the Conway training. The second mate inspected the halyard and found that my double sheet-bend had held securely and that it was the metal Inglefield clip that had failed. He told the third mate to apologise for his disparaging remark about the Conway training. I still have my copy of Norie's Tables with its canvas cover sewn during seamanship classes down at the Dock. It has travelled the world with me as I served with various shipping companies. I think that if it had not had such a robust container it would have fallen apart many years ago due to the amount of service it gave.

One of my outstanding memories is of lying in my bunk during my first term with the windows of the dormitory open facing the Straights and listening to the echo of the Last Post being played up at the camp, frequently by the Holl twins.

The two years at the Conway were full of activity and new experiences. So much so that sometimes I have difficulty sorting out the different experiences. I believe it was in the autumn of 1955 that a party of cadets were sent to London to participate in the Seafarers Service at St Paul's cathedral. I was lucky to be one of those selected. P&O provided accommodation for us on board the Arcadia. I think it must have been berthed at Tilbury. We were ushered by a steward to our cabins and I found myself in a single berth cabin. I turned in and settled down for the night. Some time later the door opened then a voice said “ I am sorry there seems to be someone in here already” and the door closed again. I do not know where the member of staff slept that night but I got a good night's rest. It appeared that our comfortable accommodation was provided to serve a purpose. In the morning we were made to line one of the upper decks and drilled in giving three cheers while waving our caps in a circle. Later some dignitary passed by in a small flotilla of craft and we duly cheered them on their way. It took only a matter of moments then we were off to our next assignment but I still have a set of postcards showing the opulent fittings of the public rooms. The comments in a letter about cheering the Duke of Edinburgh on his way at Llanfair P.G. reminded me of the incident.

Another away day was a visit to an Ellerman line cargo ship berthed at Liverpool to give us cadets an idea of what we would be working on. Despite all the preparation I must admit that, from a practical point of view, when I joined my first Port Line ship in Barry Docks at the end of August 1956, the only thing I knew was that the pointed end went first!

In my fifth term I was promoted to Junior Cadet Captain of Forecastle (Fxl) Division at the House. I do not think that I was any better as a cadet than my contemporaries but being friendly with the head master and taller than the average cadet cannot have harmed my chances of promotion. I do not know what they made of it but the poor new chums is Starboard Fxl had to put up with a number of “pep” talks from me after lights out.

So, in my QB term ( Quarter Boy for non-Conways) I was promoted again to Senior Cadet Captain Fxl at the wooden-hutted camp. This was helped by my competitor Dicky Blyth who had been Junior Cadet Captain of Fxl at the Camp being promoted to Deputy Chief Cadet Captain under J.O. Shand, the Chief Cadet Captain. Hence the comments in the letters about curtains and having a Valet as I had a cabin to myself in the Starboard Fxl Hut!

As you will see, there are an overwhelming number of references to food of some kind or other in the letters. I believe that this subject has always been high on the agenda of any teenager at a boarding school. Young boys at that age are normally growing steadily while at the same time being very active, particularly those engaged in any sports. It would be surprising if they did not have a healthy appetite. I have especially fond memories, as part of the rugby first fifteen, of the Pangborne and Worcester training periods for the fortnight before the matches. The first thing in the morning was a training session on the playing fields for an hour under the direction of “Pug” Baylis. By the time we got back the other cadets had finished breakfast. We then went into the dining room at the house and consumed a breakfast of double portions of everything – it was glorious. Our health and development were taken seriously. With about twenty cadets sleeping in each of the wooden huts there was a good chance of infections being spread. Every term our weight, height and chest expansion were measured. All my measurements increased steadily over the two years.

Another memory from the rugby matches is the occasion we went to London to play the Worcester team on their home pitch. They provided overnight accommodation in the ship's hospital. The Worcester was a modern steel hull built to look like a wooden-wall sailing ship. It was moored at Greenhythe in Kent. The hospital was immediately above the chain lockers in the fore part of the ship. Every time the ship swung to her moorings there was a grating noise as the chains rubbed on the steel hull. We were convinced that it was hoped that we did not sleep well. I do not think it bothered most of us. They may have been taken aback by the roar of our team-building Hullabloo before the match started. The match was fairly even but, right at the end, a beautiful drop goal by our fly-half won us the game.

It was because of my involvement in sport that my parents stayed at Beaumaris for the Sports Week in June 1956. In addition there was a surprise as I had been nominated as one of the five cadets from which the ship's company of cadets would elect the cadet who would receive the annual Queen's Gold Medal. The other nominations were A.D.Shand, Dicky Blythe, Folenfant and the last one may have been G.L.Beatty but I have sadly mislaid my copy of the Cadet from that year. I did not win. I believe Dicky Blythe, a very pleasant character also from Fxl, received that honour. I still have my copy of the Bible that was presented to each of the other four. One of my proudest achievements I did not learn about for several years. One day I was browsing through the Cadet magazine of 1956 and found the Sports Day results. One of the awards was for the cadet who achieved the most combined points for all sporting activities. To my surprise I had come third and this pleased me as much as anything else.

I enjoyed my time at the Conway and feel that the training did, under the circumstances, its best to set me up for my career.

The box containing these letters also held many subsequent letters to my parents from various parts of the world as I followed my career through companies carrying out different roles as part of the shipping and off-shore oil industries. I believe I am one of few who started their careers on the Conway to have served at sea until retirement. But that is another story. It was not for many decades, when my son was working as an outdoor activity instructor at Llanberis, that I eventually revisited Plas Newydd.

Some explanatory notes for readers of the letters.

Nana was my name for my grandmother who was living with my parents.

Wendy was the family cat, not a sister as I was an only child.