

Memories of the Vindi

By Colin Smith 1964

Here are some random memories of my time on the Vindi as I recall them. No doubt as I burrow deeper into my memory others will appear. Some of the facts have probably become mangled by time, so please correct me if I got it wrong.

I remember looking out of the window as the bus entered the camp gates. It looked like boot camp. Tough, lean close-shorn young men in uniform, white painted perimeter rocks, a ship's figurehead. I felt very gloomy. We stopped in front of the Regulating Office and piled out. Compared with the inmates we looked bizarre, almost in costume. The boys from the north wore Rocker and Teddy Boy outfits.' drainpipe trousers, boot-lace ties, drape jackets, duck's arse haircuts with an elephant's trunk at the front, glistening with Brylcreem. The few southerners (if I am right it was policy to send the boys to the camp farthest from their homes) were Mods, wearing Parkas, long hair and suits. What a mixture.

If I also recall correctly the new boys arrived on Sunday and were given until Wednesday to decide whether they wanted to stay. After being checked off and lectured by the officer outside the Reggy Hut we ended up in our billet, stowed our possessions and were then led down to the ship for "food". After mother's home cooking this stuff was indigestible and we pushed it away miserably - whereupon the waiting Bosun's Mates pounced on it. I believe Wednesday was haircut and uniform day. I still have a photo of me with a huge right angle cut out of my hair from ear to ear.

My bunk was the top one halfway down the left side of hut B4. At nights the security lights glowed dimly and the Bosun's Mate shuffled up and down after roll call and lights out shouting "Be Quiet!" It was futile. Every time he got to one end the boys at the other end would start talking. The Bosun's mate would turn and head for the voices at the other end. As he retreated the chatter would start up again behind his back. This sport lasted until we all fell asleep.

For some reason I was appointed "Bends & Hitches" Bosun's Mate. This was a rare privilege, because it had the perk of being able to go below to the Bends and Hitches room after breakfast, rather than joining the choir over the galley on the upper deck. I had a life-raft down there that needed pumping up every day.

At one point I was given the job of teaching a boy from Birmingham how to box the compass in quarter points. I tried everything to get it across to him, but after weeks he still didn't get it. I think he was allowed to go to his Pool after being held back a week. For my part I never forgot how to box the compass and can still do it today (36 years later) without effort.

Film Night: I remember the current hits being played before the show. I saw boys from Liverpool weeping with homesickness as they listened to Cillia Black's "You're My World". When the Popeye cartoons started, boys from the Pool billet who had no Popeye's (weeks) to go waved huge zero's (0) made out of rolled-up newspapers in the projectors beam. They sat at the front. Behind them the boys with one Popeye to go held up ones (1) also made out of rolled-up newspaper. There was cheering and stamping.

Everything was about days and weeks to go. It was an obsession. Boys counted the carriages of the goods trains on the track on the Welsh side of the Severn, calculating whether there were more carriages than weeks/days to go.

The V.D. lecture was a real treat. This forlorn character would show us slides or a film and, to a barrage of heckling, his flip charts. We gave him a tough time and at the end he was so mad he said "Every year one in five merchant seamen have VD That means if you stay for five years you're bound to get it, and the way you bloody lot have treated me tonight I hope you all get it!"

I remember Captain Poore, who I thought a bit snooty. I was surprised by how familiar his face was when I saw it in the "Images" section. All I remember about him is that his wife had a poodle and the boys were expected to walk it. I'm sure it got a sharp kick when she wasn't looking.

Mr Wright I remember as a quiet, mild-mannered, soft-spoken man. "BC Ferries" still uses his excellent seamanship manual.

Mr Gray was our hero. I think that's him, the younger man at the officer's table in "Images". I think he was from Australia and went back to sea periodically. He had either a natural or sun-fed tan. We admired him because he stood up for the boys and was always yelling at that filthy skinny cook (was he called Bones?) about the quality of the food. Mr Gray's cabin was in our hut. When he came back late one night from the Sharpness Hotel blind drunk, we were all fast asleep. The lights blazed on and in he staggered, swaying and roaring incomprehensible nautical commands, until he staggered into his room and collapsed on his bed. A bunch of us got up and put him to bed.

Mr Turner was a great hearted cockney who loved the sea. He taught seamanship and could be easily distracted by asking him about his time at sea. His eyes would mist over, he'd get that faraway look and tell of "great big green'uns breaking over the bows. She goes down and you don't fink she's going to come back". He also said "if the hofficer asks yew ows yer 'ed, he's not asking after yer 'elf" all done in a real cockney twang.

Mr Agate was almost universally despised and the look on his wretched face showed that he reciprocated the feeling. He was one of the most unpleasant people I have ever met. Any human feeling he may have had was lavished on the Vindi's figurehead. It was said his port list was caused by the Vindi's permanent port list. The boys vandalized the figurehead to get back at him

Squeezy Jackson I remember as short, with NHS glasses. After the bugler blew reveille and we had to be out of bed, he would come around the huts and any boys still in bed would receive a jet of cold water from his plastic Squeeze bottle. Since they were a relatively new idea he must have been a pioneer in this application.

Scouse Jackson I remember as a big fat pink man with curly white hair, a booming voice and wild eyes. That may be him last right at the Officers table in the "Images" section. One of his habits was to collar a Bosun's Mate near the clock and say "Bosun's Mate, fetch me six naughty boys!" We'd reluctantly go up to where the boys were all huddled around the galley singing, and ask for six volunteers. We'd all troop down. He'd line them up and tell them over and over again "You are all naughty boys." We had to recite back "Yes Sir, we are all naughty boys." Thus satisfied, he would dismiss us.

On another occasion I was standing in the sally port at the head of the boy's gangway. He threw me the key to the Bosun's locker, but I missed it. It plopped into the water. He then went down into the lifeboats with a torch to look for it, albeit that it had sunk to the bottom. On yet another occasion, during a full moon, I saw him standing in a lifeboat bowing to the moon.

All I remember of the sickbay was the lavish use of castor oil.

One of the worst jobs the Bends & Hitches Bosun's Mate had to do was to make sure that stove oil was carried down to the ship. At the top of the path to the ship was a green shed, just to the left. I had to fill these big Jerry cans and force/persuade/bully other passing boys to take them down to the ship. Of course I never took on the bullies like psychopath Tommy Tucker from Liverpool. The system was unfair, it allowed the bullies to dodge work and exploited the weaker boys. I hated the job.

One officer I remember was Mr Briggs. He was a tall, thin distinguished looking ex-naval officer who had been forced to leave a brilliant career due to diabetes. He was our officer for Galley Watch. I remember once seeing him sprinting desperately across the camp for his insulin injection.

I believe that among the boats there was a sleek, fast boat that was reputedly the royal barge from the previous Royal Yacht "Victoria and Albert".

I created a stir when I claimed to be an atheist and refused to attend church on Sunday mornings. They punished me by giving me a huge pile of spuds to barber. My mother got in touch with our MP and there were questions asked of the Minister in the House. In the end I was told to read or do light duties during church parade.

I remember during Galley Watch we'd come up to wake the next watch and place a piece of bread covered with sticky jam right alongside the boys head on his pillow. We'd whisper something to make him roll over straight onto the bread. Galley watch was great because we just ate and ate to fatten us

up before our parents saw us. If we were short of bread we used to go over the side on a rope and rappel down to the bread locker porthole, climb in, tie on a loaf and send it up.

Anyone who wasn't hut cleaning had to do P.E. on the parade ground. Everybody tried to dodge it. One day the instructor saw a figure moving in the woods and shouted to me "Bosun's Mate! Go and get that boy!" so I set off in reluctant pursuit and soon burst into a clearing full of Vindi boys lying languidly on the grass smoking. I ran right by, telling them to keep their heads down and reported back to the instructor that nobody was there.

At some point I was put in charge of a stewards billet. There must have been some sort of riot, so they wanted a Bosun's Mate in charge. One day, when my parents came down and stayed at the Sharpness Hotel, I went out to visit them that evening. When I came back later that night the hut was a complete shambles with feathers, pillows and polish everywhere. Another riot.

I remember one time going to Berkeley Castle to pull weeds, a welcome change to the rigours of the camp.

The Colour Watch (one week before the Pool week) had to keep sentry at the Guard Hut in two-hour shifts throughout the night. It had a sheltered entrance and the ship's bell hung nearby. It was lonely, dark, windswept and eerie. The boys used to hunker down on the ground for safety and to keep warm. Some of us would creep up and tie a light line to the clapper of the bell. Then, paying out the line, we'd retreat to a safe distance and then pull the rope like bloody hell. The boys would jump out of their skins.

My friend Bernie Drag was unusual in that he lived not far away in Cirencester. I used to go home with him at weekends to his Polish parents. His father used to give me hot, blue 140 proof, Polish Vodka that burned as soon as it touched my lips. I would like to look him up one day.

Near the end of my stay there I was asked if I wanted to take an exam that would lead to a £25 scholarship from the Marine Society to go to pre-sea cadet school. They very obligingly showed me the questions and asked me if I could do them. I memorized the questions and then said yes. I was given one night a week with the schoolmaster in Dursley, ostensibly studying but really scoffing down all the home cooking his wife could provide. Eventually I took the exam, and instead of going to the Pool went home and then on to King Teds Nautical College. The Marine Society doled out the £25 at a rate of two quid a month.

I remember the cook standing over the porridge in the morning, a fag burning in his mouth, with ash falling into the food. He was unshaven, stank and coughed a lot. If he saw a cockroach passing by on a nearby bulkhead he'd swat it so that it fell into the porridge. The joke was that this was the only fresh food we ever got.

To cap it all, I really felt old in 1996 when I took my Canadian family to the Science Museum in London. Inside the foyer there was an engine I thought familiar. It was the 3-legged steam reciprocating engine from the training ship "Glen Strathallen" on which I trained after leaving the Vindatrix. My bones creaked as the memories flooded back.