

Graham Woods – PROFILE - FULL

Born Harlesden London the night St Pauls defied the blitz (but then anyone expecting was likely to have given birth!). Raised with grandparents in the Sutton Surrey area and went to Glastonbury Secondary Modern.

Not wishing to become a Pongo and have bullets fired at me just because the government called some hapless youths forwarded I decided to foil them by joining the RN.

I failed the Tiffy's exam because my IQ was too high, so I decided to enter the man's way. I signed on at the Charing Cross recruiting office at the age of 14 years & 11 months old and entered Ganges on the 3rd Jan 1956. A place that I am convinced if they placed today's prison population there would be a public outcry. Eighteen months later having survived (just) I left as a fully fledged Boy Signalman and very proud of my little gold crossed flags.

I was flown out from some magical airport by the name of Blackbush in a Dan Dare Viking aircraft to join my first ship HMS Ursa who was part of the 6th FS operating off Malta. Excitement at last, but more importantly I was going to get paid at some point. Five shillings a week (25p in today's loot) was all I had been used to! Life onboard a type 15 frigate was pretty hectic, the hangover of the war still lingered in the minds of a lot of badgemen and above and ones position as just a 'Boy' was something akin to a 'spit kid' spending most of my time being sent for 'sky hooks' glass hammers or rubber nails! Life was just a ball of fire. My first Christmas in 1957 was spent patrolling around Cyprus, well the ship did, and I and the other Spit Kids had to patrol the upper decks with a loaded Lanchester. These are machines that are great for having a pot at large fish that one thinks could be a frogman about to attach something, but at 0400 in the morning the alarm rattlers do tend to wake the crew a bit early.

Malta was the Squadrons home base. Mine was the 'Gut' - well I had to grow up somehow. After many months exercising with the 6th Fleet, forever chasing Russian subs but did nothing when we found them, evacuating 95% of the crew into RNH Bighi with Asian Flu and spending a week loafing around in a corridor on a stretcher, I finally left my beloved first ship. I had now been promoted to what was known as a TO3 this stood for something fantastic called a Tactical Operator 3rd Class, I didn't like it but at least I still had my flags. After a spell of leave, naturally in uniform on the back of my BSA 250 and the government having cancelled conscription and I had signed on for 9!!! How green is that?

I was drafted to a tin can called HMS Exmouth in the Clyde. This magical can could rock itself almost in half in Iceland during the infamous Cod War or when it wasn't doing that in Force 9's upwards it was offering itself as Target vessel in the Clyde for the COCOQC's I don't know what was worst, rocking ones guts out or having the expectancy of a Mk 44 torpedo flying under my bunk as it entered one side of the ship and exited the other, you may have realised that one could open the ships side with a can opener! It did change though, all type 14's were taken into Rosyth to have a strengthen plate fitted, you know Rosyth, and it's the place where one plays floating paper ships on fire!! Good fun that. The torpedoes also had a funny side (sometimes), I once watched a pattern of four hit the beach in Irvine Bay, I'd never seen people in deckchairs riding a torpedo before more fun.

After all this excitement a spot of leave and I was drafted on a magical new type of ship called an AD frigate a cathedral class by the name of Chichester. This also turned out to be great fun but by name I had sat an exam that made me a TO2 this is 2nd Class stuff now. I was no longer a Spit Kid or a Noz I was an Able rate, I was an old salt (3 years) and full of it. The Yeoman was a Looney, but I did make his day on many and occasion, I accidentally at night let a wire halyard get caught up in the mouth organ radar on the rear of the ship, cranes were need on Q11 Portland to lift it off to untangle it, and another classic I put the ship 200 miles out of position, the Captain wasn't amused

neither was the OTC in HMS Tiger. Well they say one learns by ones mistakes. Once the ship had had a new Port Engine (the other blew up) we deployed to the Med. Oh dear one of my old haunts. Another story perhaps eh. We did the withdrawal of Cyprus by taking the Governor Sir Hugh Foot, his wife, kids and a bloody dog who C***** on my nice painted flag deck.

And by the early 60's I was getting a bit fed up with rocking my guts out, there had to be something better. I'd tried everything on those ridiculous drafting pref forms, they are those forms where one puts area Chatham and they send you to Guzz, if memory serves me right I fooled them I put Pompey and I got Chatham! Commander in Chief Nores Flag Ship. Now this was most definitely me, and I knew I had been recognised CinC's Flag Ship, next stop the Britannia.

HMS Paladin was possibly a WW1 reject that resurfaced in WW2; it had an open bridge and a WW2 Captain whose only interest was getting to his pad near Maidstone at weekends on his scooter which he housed near where we kept the ships dressing lines. What a heap of iron this was. The sparkers, the buntings, the writers and duty elect all worked together. At a weekend we took turns to be Duty It. This involved conducting the flag ceremony with anyone one could grab, then getting on the ships bike and getting the signals and official mail. At sunset again grabbing anyone to pull the flags down and getting the upper deck lighting on. In the morning the Duty It, flashed up the galley for the duty chef and turned off the lights. This was CinC Nores Flagship? No one ever saw him!!! Let alone knew who he was. The crew were great but operating a radio circuit in freezing cold in a soaking wet duffle coat trying to impart information to a Captain who sat in his chair and allowed the North Sea to smash into his face wasn't my idea of heaven. Well, another experience I suppose.

HMS Mercury now beckoned for I now had the taste for power. I wanted more stars to my gold flags and so it was I did my LTO's course. A Leading Tactical Operator - POWER. At last On completion in came the draft chits: Commander in Chief Allied Forces Mediterranean. That's ME. Where in hell is this? Well to be precise it was the most prestigious building in Floriana in MALTA! Oh heck here we go again. I do not particularly wish to go into too much detail on this as it was the start of a married life that failed except to say it was a fantastic experience, not only did I work within the NATO umbrella, I also worked underground in the War Rooms Lascaris and also onboard HMS Ausonia the depot of the Commander of Submarines Mediterranean (COMSUBMED) so CINCAFMED and COMSUBMED became very sin ominous to me. Here I was at the heart of the cold war, handling information that would make ones hair curl.

On my return to the UK after a spell of leave I was drafted to HMS Verulam at Portland. Another type 15 one would say. But not quite so. This vessel housed the most advanced sonar the world was ever to know and which today is used throughout modern navies. I have to add that it was this secret that the Vassel spy ring disclosed to the Russians. I cannot and will not get drawn into this except to say that my Lieutenant Divisional Officer who gave me the 'leg up' with points and who latter became the First Sea Lord was responsible for my transition into becoming a CCY (TCI).

Having left this most interesting vessel I was sent on a Petty Officers Course at HMS Mercury thanks to Sir John Brigstocke (Ring any Bells)?

HMS Caprice was now looming. But I still had to prove myself a bit further and would you believe ANOTHER type 15 in the name of Relentless. I didn't like this ship, it had a major fire and the club swinger tried to disturb my watchkeepers. I sent him packing, but not the joss man who appeared 5 mins later! Promotion was quick and before I knew it I was onboard Caprice.

Heck a very new Yeoman and a very new Captain. Pretty scary stuff.

I don't remember the first meeting between Tim and I; I have vague recollections of the CCT's (Command Team Trainings) but not a lot more.

Having joined Caprice my concern as a newly qualified Petty Officer was twofold. Who was it's Captain and would he and I gel? Would I respect him/ would he respect me? – Big issues for the success for the department, a department that both he and I had to have confidence in.

Next were the lads. Who were they?

It did not take long to get us together. LRO was now the order of the day. It was followed by a (G) or (T) Ali Dow was our illustrious Leading Radio Operator (General) and George Codling was my right hand man (T). George like me was in his first vessel as a leading hand.

Portland was our first test. Who could ever imagine that one of our first evolutions would end in almost disaster?

As Caprice entered the Portland Exercise areas for what was the start of her work up, it had been programmed by FOST that Caprice was to carry out a LJTX with HMS Aurora (F10) to transfer the CST Commander John Cox from Aurora to Caprice. For anyone unenlightened and from what I have gleaned, Commander Cox had been Commander Tim Bevan's Commanding Officer onboard HMS Naiad when Tim was his Jimmy. As Cox was raised from the Stbd side Fwd deck of Aurora Tim asked me as to procedures regarding events such as man overboard, I started to explain that there was little either ship does, but Tim insisted that I check the book (ATP16) - Phil Rowe passed me the book and just as I was about to explain and as Cdr Cox was hoisted ready for the inhaul procedure and as his legs disappeared over the side of Aurora the line parted!

With my brain in my mouth I think I stood mesmerised. Here was a person attached to a line between two frigates being dangled in and out of the water at a speed of about 12 knots and people on both sides in total disbelief. Within seconds everyone seemed to go into auto. The lifebuoy ghosts on both vessels did their bit - some magical seaman climbed the gantry on Aurora and released Cox by cutting his line Both vessels did an emergency breakaway and reversed as Cdr Cox floated clear surrounded by enough rubber to embrace 50 men! Fortunately another warship attracted by the emergency signals namely HMS Keppel was crossing in the vicinity of our area and realised her position. While Aurora and Caprice did a 180, Keppel dropped her whaler and was on her way to Cox. It was rumoured that the coxswain of the Keppel was given a rollicking by Cox whilst still in the water for having his fenders out! No justice eh?

Our time in Portland was sadly completed by the loss of Lo Mon Chok our No1 laundry man who was washed overboard in the Portland races. An event that I remember as if it were yesterday but one I wish to forget. Another 'if only' event.

Life onboard Caprice was good, but having completed its round the world trip I felt I more than deserved a shore job. After a spot of leave I was posted to the Commander in Chief Fleet Headquarters. Now this can't get any better, a shore base in Northwood Middlesex. As a Yeoman of the watch I was responsible for signal traffic to and from the C-in-C, but it was not to last. One weekend I was contacted by the NPM and, within hours, I was on my way to Bahrain to become the Yeoman to the Commodore Gulf Sir Peter Anson Bt. What a life. I even managed a gold watch from its Sheik, Isa Bin Sulman Al Kaliffa! The father of the 'King' they are trying to depose as I write.

The closure of the Gulf station & HMS Jufair led to my return. And it was from here I took a 5 year draft to MOD where I was involved in the setting up of the Automated Signal Distribution system more commonly known then as AMRAD. This was where the three letter indicators at the start of a message were inserted to allow correct distribution by a machine to recipients.

After the years of wallowing in self denial and extreme wealth I suddenly received what I think years before were called a 'Draft Chit' – who the heck had found me! Some twat!

HMS Antrim? What the heck was this thing? Scared out of my wits I decided to carry out a self indulgence PCT at Mercury followed by a very quick voluntary Royal Arthur. I also followed this by a very long Tactical Communicators Instructors Course. All of which culminated in my promotion to CCY (TCI)

I joined Antrim in or around 1977 where I was introduced to one of the RN's most controversial of Commanding Officers and for the next 2 years I suffered the most extreme from a Command that seemed to have a complete down on anyone that so much as coughed in the wrong place. However the Commands of the FOF1 Admirals, 2 of whom I warmed to, was most rewarding which included Admiral Morton and Squires. My crew of 'Buntings' was second to none, some of whom have now become, to my knowledge, Lt Cdrs, Oi/cs of Major Coastguard Stations, and Senior Instructors in Australia one in particular who is now a Senior Radio Officer within the RFA.

I left the RN in 1980 after 25 yrs, having finally served the Officers Training Section in HMS Mercury for Short and Long Communications Officers training. Was dispatched in the December of 1980.

It wasn't easy. Where does one go? In 1981 the annual Census was upon us. What the heck was all this rubbish? At first I became one of the guys who roam a defined patch ready to pounce. This in turn led to their offices. I got to like it, well for a time that is. Here was a place employing 1000 people of which there were only 20 men!!! I was exhausted (Phil eat your heart out!).

As time progressed I decided I had to move on. And in 1985 having been offered a senior position within the civil service I decided I could not accept a lifetime among women sitting or performing on desks! and accepted employment with the BSS the British Sailors Society in Southampton as its Assistant Manager. I had a short spell in Dover as manager of the club there but, unfortunately due to a bad disagreement between myself and the Southampton manager I decided I could not accept issues that were against my morals and departed.

In 1987 I joined an American Company supplying and servicing engineering equipment to the industry. The rewards were good but hard work, this lasted approximately 5 years until someone told me the RFA organisation was crying out for past RN communicators.

I attended an interview in that massive skyscraper at Earls Court and was duly taken onboard. My first vessel was the RFA Olwen later the Sir Galahad, Sir Percival, Black Rover (twice) Fort Grange and Fort Austin. The most memorable times were on the Black Rover (The Portland Tanker), we knew it all, and to watch the half wits on the alongside warships running around like the blue a*** flies I found most amusing - old times.

Later 5 months at Split in Croatia onboard the Fort Grange dodging bullets and in the end completed a tour that took me to the Landing Crafts. Finally having spent weeks in Jordan exercising with the Royal Jordanian Army in temps of 40+ followed by all those trips through the Inner Leads to the frozen wastes of Norway for Wintex's, I thought it was time for my departure. Furthermore I had become medically injured so I sought a discharge.

On departure and with age against me I needed a quiet number for a few years. I joined the Corp of Commissionaires on the security section, and finished up back at, of all places, the Office of National Statistics in Titchfield where it had all started, albeit this time looking after the thousand women, the one's I left all those years ago!!

Within a few years I decided it was time to retire. So it was in about 2003 I retired totally. My 4 children were well away and producing the 9 grandchildren and 2 greats.

Highlights: There were a lot. But to have met so many good guys during my military associations is possibly the most rewarding, memories of who will never die.

Likes/Hobbies: Real Ale, Rambling, Dancing, Cards, Folk & Country Music, Films, Theatre....and being married to the most wonderful girl in the world.

Dislikes – Civil Servants, local government officials and similar species.