



"Times are bad. Children no longer obey their parents, and everyone is writing a book." "â€"
Marcus Tullius Cicero (106-43 B.C.)

Editor's note : In these uncertain times there's concern that the youngest generation lacks the will to serve.

As a sixteen year old I was in my first fire fight on a ship in the South China Sea.

I had joined the Royal Navy in May 1964 having just turned 16 and commenced initial training at HMS Raleigh, down by Plymouth. I'd joined the RN partly to see the world (there is more to life than the street/town you live in - mine being Newcastle upon Tyne). My uncle was a Stoker in the RN, I never knew him as he was killed in World War II. My dad was in the Royal Signals during the same war so I combined the two ie: Joined the Royal Navy as a radio operator. My nickname in the RN was "Soapy" as there was a soap manufacturer many years ago called Watson.

The training was a bit of a shock especially when I discovered the 'delights' of collective punishment which involved our whole squad being turned out of our beds after midnight and made to run round the parade ground in the pouring rain, with our .303 Lee Enfield rifles above our head.

After our basic training I then trained as a Radio Operator at HMS Mercury the RN Signals school just outside Portsmouth where we learned morse code, typing, cryptography and radio procedures etc.

I was courting a lass in Newcastle at the time so I put a request in to be drafted to HMS Cochrane at Rosyth, it being the closest establishment to home. The Navy listened and duly sent me to Singapore for 9 months.

She wasn't best pleased either and moved on.

There I joined HMS MARYTON, a Ton Class Minesweeper of the 6th Mine Counter Measures Squadron on 15th March 1965 based in Singapore. Being just a young chap I had no knowledge of current world affairs and was oblivious to what was happening in that part of the world. On my very first night at sea in March 1965 we were in company with another minesweeper, HMS Kirkliston. I was in the messdeck standing next to another young lad when we heard what sounded like knocks on the side of the ship. Everyone (but us) dived to the deck.

What the two of us didn't realise was that we were under attack and the "knocks" were high velocity rounds! It should be noted that Minesweepers at that time weren't made of steel or any ferrous metals (danger of magnetic mines) but made of wood and aluminium so rounds often went through. Later we noted where we had been stood, the bullet holes were behind us and it appeared that one round went just to his right, next one went between us and the one after that went just to my left.

Lady luck was certainly looking down on us that night.

The action went on for some time during which one enemy vessel (sampan) was sunk and another disabled, resulting in two Indonesians dead and 19 captured. It was an exciting night all round as the only parts of the ship not hit by small arms fire were the Wireless Office and the Wardroom. We suffered two casualties, luckily not serious.

This event was reported some days later in various National newspapers including The Times, and The Daily Mirror, dated 29th March, (Navy smashes "invasion") and also made the news on television at home.

The next morning I was given the task of painting any damaged areas and I started counting the

bullet holes. I stopped counting at 300.

It was at this point that I was told about the Indonesian Confrontation and our role in it. We were to carry out patrols, usually lasting about 4-7 days, in either the Singapore or Malacca Straits against Indonesian insurgents attempting to land on Singapore or Malaya. In April we sailed down to Kuching, Sarawak, (there celebrating my 17th birthday), Sarawak was one of three territories belonging to Malaya in the north part of the island of Borneo, which was known to the Indonesians as Kalimantan. There we carried out patrols but in the main we operated out of Singapore with numerous "contacts" and those at night quite often resulted in firefights with several kills and prisoners.

My role onboard as a JRO (Junior Radio Operator) was in the Wireless Office but during the hours of darkness my Action Station was on top of the covered bridge, along with a Leading Seaman, manning a 2" mortar to provide illumination of the targets. We also had hand held Schermuly flares to fire into any craft alongside should the need arise. There we had a good overview of the action but equally we were in full view of the enemy and numerous rounds came our way. No PPE apart from a life jacket, anti-flash hood and gloves. Nothing that would stop a round !

Exciting stuff for a young lad (was still 16 when we had that first firefight)
All in all quite an introduction to life in the Royal Navy.

Leading Radio Operator David "Soapy" Watson March 2023