

UNDER THE OLD RAILWAY CLOCK

CAROLINE WHITEHEAD

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Surviving The Shadows

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UNDER THE OLD RAILWAY CLOCK



Reminiscences of a time, a place, and
a very dear brother, William Marshall

CAROLINE WHITEHEAD



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DEDICATION



To my dear friend Odette.
Your encouragement brings out the best.

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To my family for their love and support
in whatever challenge I dare to face.

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PROLOGUE



In 1933 at a summer holiday camp in Dymchurch, Kent, destiny deemed a ten-year-old boy and a eight-year-old girl would meet under the most bizarre circumstances.

The camp was the year's high point for children from the County's Catholic Church-run orphanages. After eating breakfast in the camp's large canteen, the impetuous young St. Anne's girl quietly slipped away from the other children, and from the camp's leaders, and went down to the beach, an area permitted only when requested, and out of bounds until such time. Watching and listening to the gentle waves of the incoming tide touching the shoreline, Caroline breathed in the salty ozone. Having had her fill of a relatively short taste of freedom, she clambered over the concrete sea wall and headed towards the playing fields. Casually strolling in the direction of the camp, she was alerted by a swish from above, as a football appeared from the sky and landed at her feet. She bent down to pick it up when a boy from St. Mary's about two years her senior approached and gruffly proclaimed, 'That's mine.'

The child was nonplussed. She picked up the ball and handed it to him. Without a word of thanks, he walked away toward the closest pitch. Deep in thought, the girl looked up and suddenly saw a camp leader

rush toward her. Gripping Caroline by the arm, the leader called to the boy by name to come back. William stood at a distance and despite encouragement to move forward, he remained motionless.

What the camp leader was to divulge to the children, would change their lives forever. Pointing one finger at the girl, then at the boy, she said simply, ‘You two are brother and sister.’

This bizarre isolated meeting in their childhood years would develop, in time to come, into a tight-knit relationship.

Where does one begin to put in words the character of a man, unique in his own style? Full of cheeky humour, my brother William Marshall often aggravated the spouses of the ladies who stopped to chat in Asda supermarket at Waterlooville with his suggestive remark, ‘Meet me under the old railway clock, seven sharp.’ I am sure he fancied himself back on ship as Petty Officer giving commands to seafaring ratings.

A proficient engineer and clock repairer, William’s mathematical brain was reliable as a timepiece’s pendulum when dealing with monetary problems. When calculating sums of money he was able to spot an error within a fraction of a penny. And he was always certain about the best odds for a bet – on a match or in life.

Apart from the difference in character of my two brothers – William gregarious, Rowland charismatic – they were one of a kind; both were caring and overly-generous when it came to family. William’s marriage to Violet for 44 years was happy. To his children, he was a generous, loving father.

During the early years of his life, by a twist of fate, he briefly met a slender eight-year-old girl who unbeknown to him until that time, was one of his sisters. It was not until two of his three sisters attended a school reunion in the County of Kent, did that boy and girl chance to meet again, all of us now in our teen years.

A relationship, uncommonly strong between some siblings, developed throughout our lives with memories that often caused me to

reflect that had this childhood incident not happened, brother and sister would have gone through life not even knowing the other existed and lived within reachable boundaries of each other. For we were all wards of the orphanages, left as infants without contact by our mother, knowing only as much of our origins – and any possible relatives – as the Sisters wished to reveal.

Throughout his 26 years service in His Majesty's Royal Navy, William develop a camaraderie with his fellow men with a carefree abandon, albeit, keeping his toes strictly on the line of protocol. In his quick action in dealing with a fire that started in the engine room, he not only saved the life of his captain, but also the ship and its entire crew. For his bravery, he was awarded a medal.

William was a man whose heart was larger than himself, someone who left his indelible mark on the world. No doubt those ladies at Asda, whom he suggested, 'Meet me under the old railway clock, seven sharp,' miss him too.

A LOVEABLE CHARACTER



My brother William was born in Lambeth, North London, England, as the fourth child of Caroline Elizabeth Marshall. From the day we knew of each other and thereafter, our respect and love for one another grew stronger as the years progressed.

Of the genes he inherited from our mother, I wondered if the humorous part of his character stemmed from there. But, in essence, I rather fancy this trait came from the male side of the family. Among other hereditary qualities, Mother was apparently a gregarious lady of fashionable flair, difficult to contest. Quite impressed with her aunt's personality, my first cousin conveyed to me that Mother was a person of extreme generosity. Yet this was also a woman who callously cast away her own infant children to orphanages. Only the surface of Mother's character has been "scratched" from family research due to the fact she was unknown to her own children until she passed on in 1952.

The characteristics of who we siblings were, or who we are, continues to haunt the writer as the many versions of this woman's history still remain a mystery. I am consciously aware that the particles of dust of the deceased are silenced, forever.

A swaggering, charismatic man who loved to "bowl" over the ladies at every opportunistic moment, it never dawned on William to care that

his style of approach to the opposite sex could please or displease them, as he charmed with endearments. Be it at the supermarket or in town, with a wink, his suggestive remark, ‘See you tonight under the old railway clock at seven,’ was a never-ending joke among the town people, particularly for his gambling cronies who knew him of old.

The antiquated clock to which he referred hung on the outside wall of the Portsmouth railway station and became a place where lovers met in silent tryst. At the appointed hour of seven, and at all other hours of day and night, it boomed the time and was heard for miles beyond the bustling naval town.

When the ladies curiously looked at him to wonder if his invitation was sincere, William returned their gaze as if to say, ‘Well, are we on or not?’

Invariably, the lady or ladies in question “clicked” on to his amorous suggestions, knowing full well he was all talk and no action.

Often within hearing distance where William stood chatting, full of vim and vigour, to their wives, some of the grumpy old men stopped in their tracks to listen.

‘What can you expect of him?’ they moaned to one another.

‘Typical Navy, blasting off like cannons in mid-ocean. It’s nothing but hot air,’ one called out, his voice reverberating throughout the store.

‘A piece in every port,’ snorted an old fellow, showing off his mouthful of large nicotine teeth and determined to get in his bit.

None took kindly to William and his innocent bantering; perhaps they were feeling threatened when he laughed and joked with their spouses or girlfriends as they stood in the aisles of the supermarket enjoying the latest neighbourhood gossip. Though fully aware of the disapproving glares and comments from their menfolk, William was not to be put off. He cajoled all the more, all the merrier.

His life philosophy: ‘If you can’t have a little fun in life, you might as well curl your toes up with a final *Amen*.’

The bantering went on throughout William’s life, more so as he aged. Even with his limited energy due to on-going health problems he

was determined to enjoy whatever years he had left. Over the decades, his invitations to ladies for marriage, gambling on the horses or meetings under the old railway clock at Portsmouth Station became progressively more bold, knowing he had little to lose. Any suggestion of stopping the wheels from turning would cause him to throw back his head and emit a loud belly laugh. As I listened to his lifestyle credo, I knew it was not on his agenda to stop and “give over”. The idea would be unimaginable. He would deem it as unlikely as someone taking the liberty of removing a cigarette from his mouth – his life and soul survival.

BACK TO THE BEGINNING



It was at the age of eight I met that ten-year-old boy with black hair, dark brown eyes and a grin on his face that stretched right across, in the playing fields at a holiday camp at Dymchurch, Kent.

My light brown curly hair, cut short to the tip of my ears, grew into soft rolls. Using sharp scissors, the person in charge of the girl's grooming cut off my hair in a style known as the "pudding basin". This procedure, to avoid long hair accommodating unseen "guests" on a child's head, was applied to all the girls at my school. As I listened to the scissors chop, chop and saw rolls of curls drop in a cluster to the floor, tears ran down my face. Pride, being a mortal sin, was considered the ultimate downfall of a girl who broke the laws of the Catholic church. I questioned my conscience, 'Did I really commit a mortal sin for wanting long curly hair?' After all, I was but a child.

Looking smartly dressed in grey shorts and a white shirt, his hair brushed off his forehead, the boy studied my face with his dark brown eyes. I was afraid to look at him, so remained dumb, thinking, 'What does he want with me? Who *is* he?'

I averted my eyes from his face. I wanted to run along the sandy beach and feel the soft white sand crunch between my bare toes. To sniff the ozone coming off the ocean, and breathe in deeply the salty sea air.

But the magic of the moment held me spellbound. Why was I wasting Nature's time on a sunny afternoon, standing mute in front of a young boy I didn't know? I wanted to watch the sun's rays glisten over the white foam above the waves, as they rose and fell in rhythmic motion to flow gently at the water's edge.

Suddenly, a motion caught the boy's eye. He recognized a woman of medium height, slim, in her mid-forties, as his camp leader, rushing towards him. Her arms were held high, waving frantically. I was about to run away, when the woman's voice demanded my attention.

'Stop!' was the command.

I held my feet to the ground, as though stuck in concrete.

Grabbing me by the arm, the woman led me to where the boy stood, looking expressionless.

Pointing from one to the other, she gasped out her words, 'You two are brother and sister.'

I struggled to free my arm from her hold, but the more I struggled the tighter she held on, as my face took on a bright red.

Thinking she had succeeded in getting the message across, the woman slowly let go of me. I fled the scene. Horrified and confused with what I had heard, I vowed never to see *that* boy again, and resolved to put the memory out of my mind.

The beautiful Dymchurch resort had sandy beaches stretching for miles along the shoreline. As the evening sun disappeared beneath the horizon, the lush green fields where hundreds of Romney Marsh sheep roamed freely, were silhouetted in beams of orange and red, casting a glow over the marshes that radiated for miles. Many children who came from different orphanages within the County went to the camp, and for two weeks enjoyed a comparatively unrestricted lifestyle. Most were of the opinion they were orphans. However, in years to come, this misinterpretation of a secret birthright was to rear its head in many forms.

After saying my morning prayers and eating a hearty breakfast in the large canteen, with a sense of pure joy, I slipped away from the “family” group to take a daily walk along the wide sandy shore. This freedom of movement on the beach or in the playing fields was permitted provided you let someone of authority know where you were going. And for how long a period. This sometimes caused children to overlap their time of freedom, when minds wandered within Nature’s boundaries and the minutes didn’t count. When this happened on a few occasions, my contrition to say a few more Hail Mary’s did not disconcert me. On the contrary, young as I was, I felt exonerated.

The sheer ecstasy of being alone, to dwell absent-mindedly without the distraction of man or beast, was Heavenly. The beauty of the landscape surrounding the holiday camp, I reasoned, was God’s creation.

With the exhilaration of youthful energy, I jumped over the sea breakwall posts that jutted out from the top of the sandy beach to a hundred or more feet out to the ocean floor. When no one was in sight, my legs straddled these breakers from the tip of the sandy shoreline to the edge of the water. With every jump, my arms in the air, I laughed as though never wanting to stop!

Strong winds gusted off the Atlantic Ocean caused incoming tides to splash over the top of the concrete breakwater that extended for miles at the top of the beach, leaving salty puddles in its wake, forcing holidaymakers to walk along its narrow ledge and jump over them.

I looked skyward at the noise of the gulls, and watched as their wings dipped and dived over the crest of the waves, with precise aeronautical skill. The gulls, and other migratory birds, feed well on mackerel and herrings, abundant in these waters.

Between the months of April and September fishermen from the nearby villages of Lydd and Greatstone used a form of trapnet fishing, once common around the estuaries and sandy shores of the British Isles, and known as kettlenet fishing in the early 1890s to the late 1920s. Wooden poles, 16 feet long, were dug 3 feet into the sand, using special spades and forks. The idea being that two men, facing each other and

digging together, could excavate wet, caving sand quickly, to dig a narrow deep hole to hold the pole which had its end bound with strips of rope or sacking, helping to hold the pole steady and upright once it was inserted into the prepared hole and sand trodden firmly around it.

Once the poles were held in place, the fishermen could hang the nets. When the tide came in, shoals of fish met this barrier of nets and instinctively they turned for deeper water and travelled along the range of net, straight into the kettle or bythe net, as it was called, becoming trapped.

Mackerel was the main catch of the kettlenets, but other species of fish were caught. A Thresher shark once caught in a net did not come as a surprise to the fishermen, knowing they were seen occasionally in these waters.

Hearing the sound of children's laughter coming from the fields, my innermost conscience warned me I had not obtained the permission of a staff member to leave the "family". I left the sandy beach, scrambled over the concrete wall with the agility of a cheetah chasing its prey, and headed in the opposite direction to where voices were heard, praying I would not be seen.

Of a quiet evening, on the incoming tide, I listened to the gentle splash of the waves as they touched the shoreline. Some of my friends and I sat on the concrete seawall and lingered after dusk, hoping to catch a glimpse of the black porpoises that swam in sequence to the fall of the waves. The noisy gulls, perhaps too exhausted from the day's squawking, settled down in their habitat and were not seen or heard of until the early hours next morning.

Children from different schools shared the large canteen for meals. At the end of the day, we played ball in the wide open fields. Evening concerts were held in the large community hall where the children sang hymns and songs in front of the seated clergy and the staff.

A slight breeze off the ocean caused the branches of the birch trees standing tall in the fields to sway gently, as the sun glistened on their silvery bark. My imagination, forever running wild, held my vision of

little girls dancing to the music of the minuet. I strolled across the open fields and held my breath as I listened to the sound of a swish that caused me to look up then crouch down on the grass, as a football landed near my feet. In utter amazement, I picked up the football and cast my eyes round the field to see where it came from. In the distance a young boy wearing grey shorts and a white shirt walked with great strides toward me. I could not believe my eyes. *That* boy again!

Staring at him, I handed back the ball. As he turned to walk away I muttered, ‘What a rude boy.’ He didn’t even say ‘thank you.’

I then ran and ran across the playing fields, jumped the concrete steps leading down to the sandy shore, without as much as a look back!

That second encounter between a young girl and a boy during the hot summer month of July, little were they to realize the events yet to unfold when, years later, the girl began her lifelong researching the family’s history and the boy also began searching for his roots.

Every year a social dance was held in the large school hall mid-July, for “old” girls and boys from the Kent area. My sister Elizabeth and I attended these functions in the hope of meeting up with past friends. On this particular occasion we arrived at the hall early, to the chatter of people inside. Entering through the school door we spotted a couple of our friends laughing to each other, as though their heads might drop off. We walked up to the chairs in which they sat – ‘What’s the joke?’ we asked.

‘Oh, it’s her sex drive that sets her off,’ said our friend Madeline, who still sported childhood freckles on her face, and was full of undulated mirth.

Although I was dying to hear the details, ‘Let’s leave it at that, shall we?’ I suggested. ‘We’re in the presence of the holier than thou.’

Before there was sufficient time to catch up with our news, the door of the school hall suddenly swung open, causing a draft of air to waft in the room. In walked a stranger. No one took the slightest notice of him.

A slim, young man with black hair slicked well back over his forehead, and dark brown eyes, looked around the room before he swaggered nonchalantly across the floor, as though directed by some terrestrial light, and came to where Elizabeth and I sat.

After asking me if I would like to dance, ‘Perhaps next time,’ I said, with an uninterested look on my face.

Without further ado he took hold of Elizabeth’s arm, saying, ‘Come on, then, let’s dance.’

She was flabbergasted! The look of surprise on the rest of our faces was enough to strike one dead. Elizabeth’s countenance was one of horror! Dancing was not one of her fortes. She preferred to tuck her nose in a book: find a peaceful spot to sit in a corner of a large library, oblivious to the noise around her, and read to her heart’s content. Her knowledge on many subjects became a topic of interest to family and friends who hoped one day, she might become an English teacher.

A young girl in her teens stood by a long table, busily taking charge of an old Victorian gramophone. As each record finished playing, with careful hands, she took it off the turning wheel and replaced it with another. Peering down to see it was safely in place, with her right hand she lifted the head holding a pointed needle and gently laid it on the record.

I watched with interest as my sister and the stranger danced to the tune of a waltz. Each time they glided past to where I sat with my friends, a smirk appeared on his face as he stared at me. At first I found this amusing but after several attempts to catch my eye, I decided enough was enough and decided not give him the satisfaction of knowing the game he was playing.

When the dance finished Elizabeth introduced the stranger to me saying, ‘His name is William.’

Nodding my head, ‘Not from this area, are you?’ I queried.

‘No, but I was brought up in another part of Kent.’

His eyes continued to study my face, as though searching a past

recognition. Seeing the conversation went no further, he muttered something that sounded like, 'See you.'

We watched as he sauntered over to a girl seated alone, and asked her to dance.

'What do you make of that?' piped up one of our friends. 'And why did he keep looking at you, Caroline, with his dark brown eyes?'

'Can't imagine,' I briskly replied, in all innocence.

I wanted to drop the subject. Yet something niggled at the back of my mind and caused me to ponder: where, when, why?

Had we met during our school days? I shrugged off the thought. It must have been a dream.

The music suddenly stopped playing. One of the organizers held up her right arm and announced in a clear voice, 'Everyone is welcome to refreshments on the white-clothed table, at the top of the hall.'

We four friends strolled leisurely to the table where mounds of food stood on large china dishes, and piled our plates with a selection of sandwiches and small cakes, daring not to commit a mortal sin by wasting any of it. I was about to bite into a sandwich, when my sister nudged my elbow.

'Look, there's a huge iced chocolate cake in the centre of the table,' she bubbled. With her sweet tooth, I knew it wouldn't take her long to tuck into a large slice of it.

DISCHARGED OUT INTO THE WORLD



William Marshall had been raised at St. Mary's Orphanage in Gravesend, Kent. Upon reaching 16 years of age, the lads were typically placed on church-run farms as labourers, or shipped off to Canada or Australia to be indentured workers on farms and homesteads. In 1940, discharged from St. Mary's, 16-year-old William began his working life on a training farm at Bletchingly, Surrey. He found the work exceedingly boring, with no change from the rigid school discipline to life on the farm. His job was classified War Work. Any thoughts of escaping were tantamount to military leave without absence. The results of such actions, unthinkable! There could be no escaping. After two years working on the farm and having given what he thought his best endeavour to help in the war effort, each day he became more restless. He realized he did not want to be a farmer. He wasn't cut out to be one.

He rose early to bitterly cold winter mornings. Overnight frosts glistened on the barns and in the fields beyond, caused him to shiver and pull his jacket tighter round his thin body to keep warm. Each winter day seemed colder than the one before, and caused him to become more depressed. He simply hated this time of the year and saw not the beauty of the landscape, but the beast in it! To an artist, it would be paradise to



William, above, with friends at Bletchingly Farm, Surrey 1940.

perfect on canvas the silent countryside in its pristine white cloak, as icicles hanging on branches of the trees sparkled, enticingly, like crystal chandeliers.

Low temperatures kept the farm animals warming themselves inside the barns. Seemingly bored with not being able to stretch and graze outdoors, the cows made low bellowing sounds all hours of the day. Only the cats that prowled in and out of the property were oblivious to climatic conditions, with a liberty masking their faces.

William sat outside brooding on a bench as he looked at the landscape with a blank mind, occasionally being distracted when a hare twitching its nose, leaped and bounded inches away from him as though to tease: ‘Try and catch me.’

In his troubled state of mind he was not about to fall flat on his face, trying to catch a silly hare. ‘Either go back to your hole, or be caught and left hanging upside down outside a butcher’s shop until you rot.’

His train of thought was suddenly distracted by the sound of horses' hooves crunching on the gravel path coming closer to him. Holding the reins in his hands, Jim, a lanky lad with a weather-beaten face and a mop of red hair, stopped the Clydesdale horse and cart in front of William.

'Come on then, time to work,' said Jim rubbing his cold hands. 'We've to haul hay in the cow's byres. Also collect eggs from the chicken coops.'

William looked at Jim, thinking wild horses would not drag him off the bench. But within seconds he took a running jump at the cart in an effort to get on, barely avoiding slipping on the ice as Jim held out his hand and pulled him on the wooden plank, to sit beside him. Offering him the reins and seeing the worried look on his friend's face, Jim laughed. 'Don't worry about guiding Old Ned. He knows the route inside and outside the farm, blindfold.'

Gingerly taking the reins from his friend, William held them between his closed knees and settled back on the hard seat, as Old Ned trotted at a leisurely pace toward the hayloft.

The next morning's early routine caused the riser to sniff the cold air, and collect his thoughts of the day's work ahead. William's future continued uppermost in his mind and he knew until the right path opened up it would dwell on him, like a festering boil. Animals were of no interest to him. He considered pigs dirty, snorting creatures who slopped about in mud. However, he gave second thought to the animal, considered it a necessary evil to provide food for the people, during this time of rationing.

Looking forlorn, his eyes travelling far beyond the meadows laced with overnight frost, when a familiar voice alerted his senses and caused him to sit upright on the outside bench. It was Jack, the local policeman, who stopped by with a mind of a good hot, strong cup of sweet tea and a chunk of fresh farmhouse bread.

A happy soul, always a permanent smile on his face, Jack saw both good and bad in the people he met regardless of their circumstances, be it related to a simple police matter or some misdemeanour requiring

stronger action. Popular with his peers and the locals, Jack was recognized as a man who took his duties seriously. The school children begged the touch of his truncheon, held firmly behind his back.

William and Jack were soon to become good friends. On his off-duty time William spent it with Jack's family, who lived in the village of Bletchingly. Their close relationship sparked a new interest in William's life, to which he clung tenaciously.

The policeman, with ears bent, listened as William rambled non-stop about the workings on the farm, with less than a spark of enthusiasm. The local bobby knew as much if not more about what went on and how these raw recruits were treated, and boarded. Attentive to his friend's version of life aboard a farm, Jack sensed he was far from happy. But this was war! Did any person over the age of 16 years have a choice where to work, or the type of work they were ordered to do? This was a government-controlled era; to founder, listed you a deserter or one who failed to help their country in time of need.

'What's up, lad, did you lose a milk churn?' said Jack in a deep bass voice.

'Er, no, sir,' came the reply.

'Well, then, what's up with you?'

The policeman knew all the lads who came to work at the farm, then move on to greener pastures. Many stayed in touch with him after leaving the farm, and considered him to be their solid rock, a stepping stone from which to achieve future goals.

William made the effort to crease a smile on his face.

'It really isn't that bad once you get in the swing of things, is it, son?' said the policeman smiling, all the while swinging his truncheon from left to right behind his back.

Leaving William sitting on the bench with his thoughts, Jack entered the back door of the farmhouse through to the large white painted kitchen where the smell of fresh bacon, sausages and eggs were sizzling in a big black frying pan on top of the Argus stove. This was food at its best! The thought of downing a plateful caused him to salivate to the point fluid

ran down the side of his mouth. The farmer's wife, Mavis, a short tubby person with a happy disposition who cooked for her family as well as for the lads who came to work on the farm, put a hot plate of food in front of him. At the ready, with knife and a fork in his hands, Jack tucked in.

As the months progressed, the friendship between farm trainee and the local bobby developed into a strong relationship. After weighing the pros and cons of learning how to run a farm and learning about far worse war work, William decided it wasn't that bad after all. One morning, as the two of them sat on a farm bench and watched ducks and chickens waddle off to a nearby field, then stop occasionally to peck for the choicest grub, William confided to the policeman he wanted to join the Navy. This was his ambition, and one he desperately wanted to achieve.

The policeman arched an inquiring eyebrow. 'Is that really what you want?'

'Yes,' came the fast response. 'It's been on my mind for a long time.'

'Well, if you're really serious we had better go to the nearest recruiting office on your next day off, where you can sign up.'

William's smile spread from ear to ear. On the appointed day, he stretched out on the seat beside Jack and watched the landscape, now green with the coming of spring, roll by. He felt the choice he made to join the Royal Navy was the right one. As they entered the village, Jack stopped the car and parked it outside the front of a large brick building.

Turning to William, he said, 'Well, lad, we've arrived. Let's get the formalities over with.'

Entering the building and seeing a young clerk sitting at the front desk, Jack inquired about a form to enlist in the armed forces. 'This lad's in a hurry to join up,' he said, all smiles.

Looking from one to the other and paying particular attention to the policeman's uniform, the clerk removed a form that sat in a tray on the top of his desk and handed it to William.

'Fill it in and bring it back to me,' said the clerk, with a curious look on his face, perhaps wondering if the lad accompanied by a policeman was in trouble and brought in to sign up, as retribution.

William gazed at the form. ‘Oh, Lord,’ he muttered, ‘how on Earth am I going to fill in all the details when I don’t even know the information they’re asking?’

He looked at the form, as though willing his mind to surprise him by springing into action.

The policeman standing in the background, waited. Sensing his friend’s anxiety, he walked over to the table where William sat, pen poised, his face a blank.

‘Come on, lad,’ urged the policeman, ‘can’t be all that bad, filling in a form. Give it here. Let’s take a look at it?’

After scanning the form, a grin appeared on the policeman’s face.

‘Tell you what,’ he advised. ‘Fill in what you know. What you don’t know, leave out.’

With the courage to write, William began to scribble in his personal details, occasionally stopping to look at Jack for guidance, then handed the form back to the desk clerk, half-completed.

‘We’ll notify you in due course,’ said the clerk, with a less than interested look on his face as he took the application form from William and placed it back in the tray on top of his desk.

On the return journey Jack suggested to William it might be best if he didn’t mention to the farmer his decision to leave the farm, or that he had applied to the Recruiting Officer at Godstone to join the Royal Navy.

‘Wait,’ he said, ‘until you receive notification from the Enlistment office you have been accepted.’

‘There will be plenty of other lads available for farm work to replace you,’ he added.

William wasn’t listening to what Jack had to say. He was too wrapped up with the idea of joining the Navy to take in the advice of his friend. The excitement of putting on a uniform was uppermost in his head. The day of reckoning could not come soon enough!

Grinning, he turned to Jack, and said, ‘Great news, isn’t it? I may get to sail the seven seas.’

‘Better wait and see if you have been accepted and passed the medical exam,’ the policeman cautioned.

Weeks went by, causing William to become nervous at the thought he may not get in. Finally, in the usual brown government envelope marked On His Majesty’s Service, he received the news his application had been accepted, and was notified to undergo a medical examination within a week. After passing his medical with flying colours, he became a member of the armed forces.

After saying goodbye to his friends at the farm, and a fond farewell to the farmer’s wife who fed him the best of food, William and Jack left by car to the railway station at Godstone, Surrey. As he was about to step on the train Jack held his arm, wished his friend the ‘best of luck,’ and slid a five pound note in his hand.

‘You will write and let us know how you get on, won’t you?’

Overwhelmed by the policeman’s generosity, with a firm handshake and final farewell, William entered the carriage. Putting his bag in the rack overhead, he slid up the window of the carriage to get a last look at Jack standing on the platform, waving his arm, until the train disappeared out of sight along the tracks.

NAVY BLUE



Joining the Royal Navy opened up new territories for William. Seafaring into foreign ports, he exuded energy in his new life, albeit at the bottom of the rung and subject to severe naval discipline.

Firmly developing his sea legs, throwing caution to the wind, and despite oft times he was forced to heave up overboard, he took to smoking and inhaling great gulps of nicotine as well as downing pints of beer and his quota of rum. During this time, as a raw recruit, his mates who were not short in coming forward to warn him of the sharks that lurked deep within the ocean bed, should he imbibe too much of the good stuff and find himself flung overboard.

‘You definitely would not want to find yourself in those waters like an inebriated monkey, unable to climb back on board!’ they chortled.

As he listened to the raucous cries of herring gulls circling the ship’s mast, he pondered the fact he was unable to swim when he joined the service, but felt it held no deterrent to what he anticipated would be an interesting and worldly life.

With the essence of exuberance to leave well behind his behavioural childhood upbringing in the county of Kent, where the principles of curriculum were accuracy and pronunciation of words, William stripped this veil of his past to the bare bones when he became a rating of His

Majesty's Royal Navy. From now on, he deemed to choose the path of his lifestyle, and live to the very limit! Like a tiger let loose from its cage, to an unknown freedom, nothing was going to stop him from indulging in his new world. Only years later did he fully comprehend that the privilege of wearing the uniform of the Royal Navy demanded full respect to his King and country. Much to his chagrin, his wild shore excursions were to rebound on him. Not once, but twice.

Years later when Elizabeth and I visited William at his home near Portsmouth, Hampshire, we sat in armchairs in the living room, chatting our heads off! Listening to his rendition of what went on between himself and his mates who worked in the ship's engine room, we were aghast to hear of some of their escapades, and wondered how they managed to avoid being put on charge.

'It would not have surprised me at all,' I chirped, 'if the Captain tossed the lot of you overboard, to sink or swim among the man-eating sharks below.'

Elizabeth sat smiling, both hands folded in her lap. Perhaps she was thinking it was nothing more than hot air between raw recruits, who needed to blow off steam to strengthen themselves for whatever unforeseen challenges lie ahead.

With the war raging on different continents, reprisals, though minimized, were maintained strictly to Naval standards, to ensure the captain was not putting his ship in danger of capsizing.

Life on the ocean waves had its ups and downs for William, literally and figuratively. A fast learner, little escaped his quick mind as he progressively made his way from the bottom of the rung to a top level, dealing with the mechanics in the engine room. With a characteristic urge to turn the world upside down, slowly, he enjoyed what life had to offer, war or otherwise. Finally, he had found his niche.

Throughout his initial four years of Navy service, William did not go overseas. He remained at home shore bases, learning the mechanics and the running of the ship's engines. His natural talent and interest in this field of work enticed him to take as many engineering courses as allowed. From this vantage point, his character dramatically changed. No longer was he required to watch his P's and Q's. He developed a camaraderie with his mates, who were mainly born and bred in the East End of London. Working alongside them he picked up their Cockney accents with relish, and mimicked their every word. His mannerism changed with a view if he behaved and spoke like them, they would accept him. This lifestyle of work, fun and play appealed to his outgoing nature, but often led him to question the repercussions to follow.

On his first shore leave William, wearing bell bottom trousers and a Navy blue hat slung precariously at the back of his head, developed a character his sisters did not recognize in him as the stranger they met, unknowingly, for the first time at a school dance reunion.

He developed what is termed a Cockney swagger, causing his wide trouser bottoms to swing from side to side as he pushed his body in and out of pubs. Swinging through the doors, locals from inside the pub watched with curious eyes as they kept on drinking, while feeling the draft of energy exuded as he entered. His disregard of the English language noticeably changed, although he was careful not to drop his "aitches". Greeting a friend resulted with a slap on his back, 'Watcha, mate,' as he laughed his head off! You would have thought he hadn't seen his friend in months the way he greeted him, when it was only a matter of days.

Foreign expressions oozed from his mouth. Those closest to him looked nonplussed as they waited to hear what exactly he was trying to convey. A cigarette dangled permanently from his lips, causing reams of smoke to swirl upward, enough to make one cough and splutter. His sisters wondered if their new-found brother would ever be normal again. Despite encouraging him to think differently he revelled in the Cockney

dialect as though he'd been born and bred within the sound of Bow Bells, and it remained with him to the end.

'Ain't life great?' he'd happily chuckle His bell bottoms swinging in unison from side to side as if ready to take flight, as he jingled and jangled shillings and pennies in his trouser pockets.

There was no stopping him! He flouted rules with careless rapture, but cautiously stayed within the radius of naval regulations. Shore leaves were spent in pubs and dance halls, and he never stopped hoping while winking at the girls for a dance. I was sure that one day he would come unstuck, or a girl would clout him round the ear for being cheeky, but it never happened.

He stepped out of being one character, working on the farm, and developed another when joining the Navy. This allowable freedom caused him to go from pious behaviour, to the utmost extreme. Carefree, he "threw caution to the wind" on shore leave, though consciously aware certain responsibilities were to be upheld at sea. His character never changed as he focused on doing what he considered the right thing, in each situation, at least by naval standards.

On one voyage, when a fire broke out in the engine room which could have destroyed his ship, William acted swiftly in getting the blaze under control, and was awarded a medal for bravery. From that moment on he began the climb up the career ladder, to further responsibilities.

TYING THE KNOT



A shy young girl named Violet, slim, with shoulder length black curly hair and a fresh complexion, regularly went to a dance hall in Walton-on-Thames, Surrey. On Saturday nights, the local girls partnered British, Canadian and American servicemen and jitterbugged to the loud music of a small band. This band was owned by a sleazy character named Eric Lawson, born and bred in the same town, who hit on the idea of running dances Friday, Saturday and Sunday nights. Money poured in to his coffers – not only did he pack the dance hall to capacity, but he also sold cheese and tomato sandwiches and refreshments at an exorbitant price. Alcohol was not permitted on the premises.

Below the dance hall, a British government restaurant served meals to the public for one shilling and sixpence. Although the main course was sparse, due to wartime rationing, the meals included desserts ranging from watery rice pudding, jam roly-poly with a custard sauce, far removed from the original thick custard, and a suet pudding with currents known as Spotted Dick.

The restaurant had once been a gentlemen's outfitter shop. It was confiscated by the government throughout the war and although it fed the public in general, the initial idea was to ensure factory workers, who

toiled many long hours on production of vital components for military equipment, received a certain amount of nourishment to sustain them.

The dancers were barely able to navigate their partners across the floor, due to tight spaces, and made every effort to avoid crashing into each other or from hitting the four tall columns that held up the roof of the hall, as they swirled around the floor.

When the band played the jitterbug or the tango, it was every dancer for him or herself in performing intricate steps without banging into walls, or other partners. Finding space to dance became the butt of ongoing jokes! With a war brewing the young people inside the half-a-crown hop, as it became known, were intent on having a good time, as incendiary bombs droned their destruction elsewhere.

As though mesmerized by a magnet waving its energy to where William stood inside the door sizing up the evening's prospects, Violet caught his eye. She saw his Navy hat held at a spiffy angle, on the back of his head. A shy person, she cast her eyes sideways and continued to watch the dancers.

Suddenly a tap on her shoulder caused her to turn round, when a voice asked, 'Care to dance?'

She look up at the face of a sailor, and smiled. Before the words came out of her mouth, she found herself caught up in his arms. While they danced Violet felt he was holding her tighter than necessary. He chatted, and laughed, as though life was a "bed of roses". The war did not enter his head as he continued to clasp his partner firmly by the waist, and enjoy each minute.

'Where do you live?' came his usual line of questioning. 'Come often, do you?'

Violet barely rose her head to his questions, which came faster than she could answer, as his arm continued its grip around her waist. As they danced, she gave him her best smile. William had never before danced with a partner who didn't want to talk about all and sundry, as they glided across the floor. This girl spoke not a word. She acknowledged his questions by moving her head up and down. A timid person, who at best

kept to herself, she was not comfortable speaking about her personal life when meeting a stranger. Particularly sailors, whose one intent was to enjoy shore leave dancing when his sea legs were on dry land.

Preparing to leave, she stopped by the cloakroom to pick up her coat and recognized the voice from behind ask, ‘Can I see you home?’

Seeing it was the sailor with whom she danced, while he chatted up a storm, she agreed.

For the remainder of his shore leave William and Violet dated, danced, hired a punt on the River Thames, stopping at a nearby pub for lunch and cold drinks. When asked, Violet agreed to be his girlfriend.

He was in cloud nine! ‘Will you write to me?’ he said in a flurry of words.

Throughout their time spent together, Violet fed him snippets of news about her family. She gradually gained more confidence speaking to this new boyfriend, who gave her the impression he had not a care in the world. Shyly she told him that, at an early age, her elder sister and herself were adopted.

Could this have been the vibe that drew them together in the dance hall? As neither one were brought up in a biological family environment?

Violet’s adoptive parents never divulged to her or her sister the identity of their real parents and why they were adopted, or from where their family originated. A dark secret throughout their childhood, they never questioned the reason how this kind and caring couple in their late fifties came to accept them.

Their “father”, a tall slim man with a slight bent, was employed in the parks department in the town of Kingston-on-Thames. A well-known horticulturist, he often gave lectures at the famous Kew Gardens in Surrey.

When Violet introduced William to her father, his deep blue eyes questioned the sailor about his family background. Explaining simply as possible, William said he was put in care at an early age but unable to give him the reason. When he reached the age of sixteen he was given

the choice to begin his adult life, either emigrate to Canada or Australia, or work on a farm.

Nodding at William, the old man could hardly contain his curiosity. In his right hand, he picked up a briar-wood pipe. With his left hand he stuffed the small bowl with an evil-smelling tobacco, and put the pipe in his mouth. His upper lip showed a deep yellow stain from constant smoking. Puffing, without taking a breath, heavy smoke permeated the room and wafted upward to the ceiling.

Staring William in the face, ‘Ever know your parents?’, he bluntly asked.

‘No,’ William replied, shifting his body awkwardly, crossing one leg over the next.

For once in his life, he remained silent, lost for words. ‘How can I respond to past history when I don’t even know it myself?’ he muttered.

This caused the listener to straighten his back up in the chair, puff harder on his pipe, all the time arching dark bushy eyebrows up and down. The creases on his forehead ran deep from the bony ridge over the eyes to the hairline. Looking at this formidable stranger who sat too close for comfort, William studied the dark expression on his inquisitor’s face.

Perhaps thinking what William was thinking, the man peered closer. ‘Well, looks as though you two were meant to meet, being more or less in dire circumstances and put in different homes,’ was his casual remark.

The inquisition over! Having lost interest in a conversation seemingly going nowhere, the old man eased himself from the chair and went in the garden.

As though propelled by a tidal wave, William and Violet spent the rest of his shore leave together. Taking the “bull by the horn” he set out to enjoy every second of his leave knowing at any time he could be called back to duty, posted to heavens know where!

Going back over the years I often wonder how two people so different in character could get on so famously, and tie the knot. Young

beautiful Violet, so shy. William, flamboyant with his never-ending jokes and zest for living, dared anyone to challenge him when having a good time on shore leave or in the pubs. A gregarious character unto himself. Somehow, life for them worked, no holds barred.

In 1946, their marriage vows were taken at the Kingston Registry Office, with Violet's sister and adoptive parents in attendance. After the ceremony, the couple left for London and spent their honeymoon at the servicemen's club in Waterloo. All too soon William returned to duty at his shore base, Portsmouth. Violet went home to her family at Cheam.

On shore leaves, William stayed with his wife in the family home. Often they took bus rides to Kingston, hopping off the bus halfway at Hampton Court, where the public are allowed in the palace grounds. The intricate maze and pathways in the gardens caused many unwary visitors much concern as they tried to extricate themselves in and out of the maze, only to find themselves hopelessly lost until another visitor came upon the scene, and guided them on the right path. Some visitors took the plunge going in the maze, once. The second time seemed too adventurous. Often it led to a frightening experience when people found they were lost. It caused more anxiety to know the garden gates were always locked after visiting hours, and palace staff did not search the grounds for dawdling visitors!

At that time I was living in a house in Walton-on-Thames, not far from Kingston. On a bitterly cold evening in December, a loud knock on the front door caused me to hurry downstairs and open it. A man stood on the doorstep, shivering, with a wide grin on his face.

Before I could open my mouth he bubbled, 'Remember me? I'm your brother William.'

I invited him in. When I last saw this fellow it was at a school reunion dance Elizabeth and I attended. We were both in our teens. At the time, although strange thoughts filtered in my head half-recognizing her dance partner, I had not connected his "Cockney swagger" to the 10-year-old boy at the holiday camp at Dymchurch, Kent. But now, here was that young lad, now a grown man standing in my hallway.

‘How did you know where I lived?’ I asked.

He’d been to St. Anne’s school in Orpington and one of the nuns gave him my address.

Although our first meeting as adults was a little restrained, we promised to stay in touch. A few weeks later, I met William in Kingston. It was there he introduced his wife Violet to me. We took to each other immediately.

From then on, I frequently met up with William and Violet to go in a local pub for cold drinks, and a chat. Violet and I were non-drinkers. The urge to indulge in anything stronger did not appeal to either of us until in later years we succumbed.

William’s four years service in the Navy did not require him to undertake active duty overseas though he was stationed at shore bases at Chatham, Portsmouth, Lowestoft near Great Yarmouth and other ports round the English Channel. Thus week-end passes made it possible for him to spend as much time as possible with his wife.

In 1947, his service with the Navy ended. After signing his release papers, with two of his mates also released from duty, they headed to a pub in Portsmouth. The three sat on stools close to the bar counter and as they drank from pint glasses, commiserated to each other how they would fare and the directions their lives would take. Leaving the pub to catch trains to London, the three shook hands and made a pact to stay in touch.

Initially, after he was discharged, it pleased William to be home. However a few months after being on dry land, he found civilian life a different “kettle of fish”, as he was now required to support not only himself but also his family. The past four years the Navy took care of his daily needs and caused him little thought or concern about his welfare.

Having acquired good skills as a mechanical engineer during his service, and taking many exams to extend his knowledge and career, did not necessarily give his qualifications an “edge” above all others, when searching for work. Nevertheless, for one so gregarious in nature it came

as a shock “out of the blue” when he realized for all his efforts to find a job there were none for the taking, let alone the pickings.

Checking the local engineering companies he applied for one job after the other, only to find positions were few and far between. This turn of event caused him to realize how fortunate he had been to serve in His Majesty’s Royal Navy without worrying where his next meal came from, plus the joy of jingling shillings and sixpences in his bell bottom trouser pockets with a view the flow of money would last forever. It was a rude awakening when finding himself in this position, knowing companies were no longer hiring now government contracts had ceased since the war ended. Any chances of future work appeared exceedingly slim.

It was during this time of financial crisis that Violet found herself pregnant with their first child. William was consciously aware of the fact that without an income he would be unable to support her or their forthcoming child. Putting his arm round her shoulders, as though to reassure her, he announced, ‘The only way I’m able to deal with our money problems is to rejoin the Navy.’

‘But, you’ve only just come out of the Navy,’ said Violet, her mouth pinched in a stubborn line. ‘I’m sure something will turn up. Give it another try.’

With employment at a standstill, William knew in his heart anyone who was searching for work may have to wait for months perhaps years, until companies were able to increase their book orders and hire additional staff. It was a difficult decision whether to appease his wife to remain in civilian life or rejoin the service. Gently lifting up Violet’s face he looked compassionately in her eyes, wishing for a miracle to happen.

‘There’s little chance of a job now the factories continue to lay people off, instead of hiring,’ he told her, trying his best to convince her it was not a question of choice where he worked. The criteria was money, and enough to pay the bills. Looking at him with an urgency in her voice, Violet insisted he keep on trying.

A shadow of depression hung over the young couple. Sitting together in the deep couch in her parent’s living room, silent in thought,

they knew life would be a struggle without a steady income. The weeks dragged by. Each day William nervously watched as his saved Navy pay dwindled, to a point they would soon be penniless. If he didn't find work before his money ran out, the consequences of not being able to provide a decent home for Violet now pregnant, would be too awful to bear. As her pregnancy progressed, she knew her days working at the office were soon to end. One path Violet was determined not to follow under any circumstance, was to go into debt.

Searching William's face, whose mind appeared elsewhere, she finally said, 'If this is the answer to our financial problems, then you must go!' Violet relented, in a voice barely audible. To her, it was the final assault on what should be a normal family life, both parents sharing the joy of seeing their family grow.

In the same year 1947 he was discharged, William rejoined the Royal Navy. Throughout the years when back in service, he sailed the high seas to foreign ports. Life for him would never be the same.

With William back in the uniform Violet did not expect to face another dilemma, now the monetary one had been resolved. When she told her adoptive parents of her pregnancy, they greeted the news with joy. Congratulations were freely bestowed. A few days after, and the excitement of the moment had settled down, her parents advised there was insufficient room in the house to accommodate a baby and she would have to find a place elsewhere to live. This came as a shock to gentle Violet who accepted life for what it offered, good or bad. The mere thought of having to undertake this task in finding accommodation for herself and unborn child without the help of William, caused her to worry about the outcome.

The housing shortage was at its worse level since the war and the prospects of finding anything remotely suitable was virtually impossible. Tears threatened to fall down Violet's face. She sat on the edge of her bed nervously twisting her fingers. Hearing a gentle knock on the door she gulped back tears that threatened to pour down her face, as her elder sister Mabel entered the bedroom. Seeing the sad look on Violet's face

she went over to the bed and put an arm round her shoulders. The news that her sister could not stay in the house, due to lack of accommodation for the baby, was the reason their parents asked her to leave, Mabel quietly reiterated.

‘We will search the neighbourhood together. Failing that, we can go into Kingston where there may be a better chance of finding a room,’ Mabel said, trying to cheer her.

On a freezing cold November afternoon, the two sisters decided to brave the elements and go house-hunting. Wearing long brown woollen overcoats and matching colour hats, as they opened the front door to the house a gust of wind caused them to gasp for breath, and hold on tight to their hats. Gingerly, closing the front door behind them, they made their way down the concrete steps to the pavement below.

The tall silver birch trees standing on either side of the wide avenue reached skyward. Strong winds forced their delicate branches to swing dangerously, as though ready to snap. Taking in deep gulps of fresh air, and to avoid slipping on wet leaves on the damp ground, the sisters held on tightly to each other as they made their way around the neighbouring avenues. Clutching the collars of their winter coats high up to their cheeks to keep warm, they checked the front gardens and screened with sharp eyes for possible rental signs in windows. None were to be seen.

Tugging on the sleeve of her sister’s coat, Violet pointed skyward. Looking at the black clouds, ‘it’s going to rain buckets,’ she said.

Mabel sensed the oncoming rain and decided they get back inside the house before the clouds burst, and soaked them. With red cheeks and cold noses they linked arms and headed for home, feeling despondent with their efforts, but a little wiser. Both agreed their decision to trudge the streets looking for rental signs on a freezing cold day, was not a good one.

As the months passed, the sisters became increasingly anxious when all their efforts to find alternative accommodation for mother and baby, had failed. ‘Winter conditions are not a good time to be out in the streets,’ said Mabel, who was concerned for her sister, now four months pregnant.

Violet had never been a robust person, and her lack of energy did not give her the strength to continue with the search for alternative accommodation. She shrugged her shoulders and said, 'What will be, will be,' and appeared in a blasé mood, which was totally uncharacteristic to her nature.

In April 1948, Violet entered the Kingston hospital and gave birth to a healthy son. The news reached William as his ship sailed into the Port of Malta.

Shortly after the birth of her son, Violet wasted little time in picking up copies of the local newspapers in and around Surrey. She did not wish to impose further on her adoptive parents, despite the assurance from Mabel they would not ask her to leave with a baby until other accommodation had been found. She was however determined to surge ahead.

Checking the newspaper columns she saw a room advertised for rent in Kingston-on-Thames, not far from Cheam where her family lived. Giving her sister the news, she asked if the baby could be left in her care while she was out searching the area. As fast as her legs could move, she took the bus from Cheam to Kingston. With the newspaper tucked safely under one arm, she hopped off the bus and walked within easy distance from the bus depot until she came to the front door of the address advertising a room for rent. She banged hard on the knocker. The door flew open, as though on a timer. Violet stood, paralyzed, and looked into the face of a scruffily-dressed woman, aged somewhere in her late forties, a cigarette dangling from her mouth. Her dingy yellow skin cried out for a good scrub of soap and water. Not to be put off by this unhealthy-looking individual Violet told her she had come about the room, advertised in the paper.

'Come on up,' said the smoker, trudging ahead of Violet up the narrow stairwell, to show her a small room that lacked the size of a mouse hole. A look of surprise appeared on Violet's face, as she entered. The room was simply furnished of non-descriptive colours, with the barest of furniture, but it was clean.



William, Malta 1954.

Walking over to the window, she looked down on one of the busiest streets in Kingston. Across from the other side of the street stood the gas works, with its tall black chimneys towering above. It was not a pretty sight; nevertheless, an essential one. The chimneys never stopped belching out gaseous fumes that caused even the healthiest of people to cough and choke. Specks of coal dust landed on the clothing of the unsuspected trespasser who sneaked into the yard after dark, hoping to

pick up free bits of coal or coke without being seen. Often the local bobby, with his truncheon at the ready, stopped by the gas works to check for intruders. If caught, one found themselves standing before a local judge. Nicking coke or coal was considered a crime, with supplies still on ration, years after the Second World War.

‘You can share the bathroom and kitchen, if you want,’ said a breathless voice, choking on the cigarette.

Violet nodded. Did the woman assume the use of such facilities were unnecessary?

After inspecting the room, ‘I’ll take it,’ Violet said in a timid voice.

‘It’s a month’s rent in advance,’ the smoker was quick to advise.

When Violet handed over the money and asked her new landlady for a receipt, she grasped the money from her, and gave a wide smile.

Boarding the bus to Cheam, Violet sat deep in thought. She wondered how William would react to the move to Kingston when he saw where his family lived, in a room barely big enough to attract the smallest of mice.

In the trunk of his car, Violet’s father packed her few belongings. Mabel sat in the back seat of the car next to her sister, and held the baby in her lap. With the key given to her by her landlady, Violet opened the front door to the flat and went up the narrow stairwell to reach the rented room on the upper floor. Father and sister trailed behind, then left the luggage by the side of the small bed for Violet to unpack. Going down the same way they entered, the old man did not stop tut-tutting until he stepped down on the pavement outside the front door. Giving him a quizzical look Mabel took his arm and without a word spoken, sensing what was on her father’s mind, she opened the side door of the car and stepped in.

Violet’s new abode caused her to tramp up and down the narrow stairwell when she needed to go shopping. But she never complained. Her main concern was a roof over her head and that of her three-month-old son. She told herself she could manage the stairs between the pram and the shopping bags, and was totally convinced the opportunity to move into a larger place would arise in the not too distant future.

The building could not be classified luxurious, by any means of the imagination. It was in dire need of repairs and in the opinion of the owner, a waste of time and money to replace broken windows caused by continual bombing. It was a sorry sight. Seeing them boarded up with heavy cardboard the neighbours and renters went about shaking their heads, it being a lost cause to complain. They knew enough about the character of the owner, knowing he would be the last person to deal with a dysfunctional building, but it would not deter him from being first in line to make an early claim for damages to the British government when the war ended.

A family by the name of Dwyers rented the top floor of the building. By sub-letting a room they were able to get money to buy the extra bottle of stout and cigarettes. This affordable luxury appeared their sole pleasure in life. Originally from Birmingham, known for its metal foundries, 110 miles northwest of London, in the industrial Black Country, they moved to Kingston-upon-Thames in the mid- 1940s.

The husband, Eric, a tall skinny man with jet black hair and a complexion that would do justice to any prison pallor, had dark brown eyes. They were so deep, enough to remind one of the swarthy Romney gypsies who roamed the English countryside earlier than the 1920s. Convinced he was on par with tenor Donald Peers, a popular singer at that time in England, lustily he sang at the top of his voice. This caused his lungs to blow in and out, like a pair of bellows used to spark the flames with sticks and rolled-up newspaper, to light a fire.

‘The whole place shakes, with his every rendition. If he had a softer voice, how nice for the baby to be lulled to sleep,’ whispered Violet to William, on one shore leave.

Eric and his wife, Lil, pallid and haggard-looking from heavy smoking and late night drinking, sported deep black shadows beneath their puffy eyes. At our first meeting, although the variety of food was still restricted, Lil’s enormous bodily weight took me by surprise. I thought, how can anyone be so fat when so little food is available? I then

reasoned to myself, lots of people in England were forced to eke out their rations by buying extra supplies through the profitable black market.

Black marketeers were known to make sizeable fortunes, enough to retire to warmer climes after the war. That was one rumour in Walton-on-Thames about our local butcher. He took extra half crowns from his customers if a wink suggested to him that getting a spare lamb's kidney or a piece of beef suet, used for making roly-poly puddings and dumplings, was well worth paying the extra money.

This additional piece of ration-free contraband was tucked inside the newspaper when the butcher wrapped up a customer's weekly ration of meat, without asking for next week's meat ration coupon. How they came by this surplus of goodies was a mystery. No one, of course, dare utter a word for fear of someone standing close by had large, authoritative ears. Billboards around the neighbourhood showed a picture of a man pointing fingers outward, with the words coming out of his mouth: *Walls have ears!* Looking at these were enough to caution the most talkative of neighbours.

Rumours ran riot that some of the crates of food destined for delivery to various parts of the country conveniently fell off lorries. When the driver recovered the crates from the ground and deemed it spoiled, he dropped the load off at a specified food station where it was declared unfit for human consumption. The general public were not easily fooled when families of the drivers were generous to surreptitiously share the spoils with some of their neighbours. 'Mum,' being the adjective. It became an hilarious joke to those who survived, under stringent regulations. That so much, when so little was available, this could happen under the noses of authority, left one totally in the dark.

Violet named her baby Daniel. A happy child with sturdy legs, his black hair showed early signs of tight curls. I wasn't living that far from the family when William came home on leave, so I often visited. Violet was a caring mother. As I watched parent and child develop a

closeness, I hoped somewhere along the years life would provide them a happy, contented future.

On shore leave, William spent his time with his wife and son in the small rented room on the top landing of the building, where at the other end of the landing, lived the Dwyers. During the time spent with them I never heard a complaint about their living conditions or whether William felt constrained in their cramped accommodation, after spending many months in the swells of open waters. He kept his thoughts to himself hoping one day better accommodation was on the horizon, and there would be a garden where his son would play.

It was a dreary dull morning, and feeling as gloomy as the dark clouds above, William casually strolled to the town of Portsmouth, his mind set on one thing. With downcast eyes, he suddenly came to a jolt as he collided with a person walking toward him. Looking up he was shocked to see it was his Chief Petty Officer whom he had forced off the pavement, and was now standing in the road.

Smartly saluting, 'Sorry, sir, didn't see you coming.'

The CPO stared at him. 'Looks as though you've come unstuck, somewhere, Marshall. Eyes up when you wear the King's uniform.'

'Yes, sir. Thinking of houses, sir,' William sheepishly grinned.

'Good luck, you'll need it. Like looking for an needle in a haystack, if you ask me,' said the CPO as he walked in the opposite direction toward the barracks, looking none the worse for being pushed in the road.

'That was a close one,' William said to himself, as he headed back to base.

The following week William and two of his mates were out searching for houses in the Cosham and Portsmouth area. Randy, in his early thirties with light brown hair and sparkling green eyes, came from the East End of London. With a carefree nature, on par with his two friends, he had few worries in the world to concern him. His friend Joe, of the same age, with black hair and eyes that penetrated one's soul when he looked at you, was somewhat in tune with William who loved laughing

and joking. He was born and bred in the Hackney district of the East End, not far from where Randy lived.

Taking duty leave together, the three had but one train of thought uppermost on their mind: “Paint the town red”, down pints of beer in pubs with nautical names, The Nelson, Ship’s Inn, Mary Rose and others that boasted serving beer that was beer and not as a few publicans were known to do, water it down to increase their profit. Some publicans were of the opinion when a sailor had money in his pocket to burn and became drunk in the process, he neither cared nor realized the quality of beer he was drinking. It was an on-going motto with the three sailors: ‘live for the day, tomorrow may be too late.’

Their plans to search the neighbourhood for accommodation they believed to be in good faith, but after walking several miles, our illustrious trio began to sag in the knees. Sweat oozed across their brows, and trickled down their shirt collars. William, generally known for his “happy-go-lucky” nature, looked as though life had dealt him a thundering blow! Noticing the look on his friend’s face, Joe suggested they take a break and go to The Sailor’s Arm pub in Portsmouth and cool off with a pint of beer, with every intent after resting and quenching their thirst, to plod on with the search.

In typical naval style, bell bottoms afloat, they sauntered through the swinging doors of the pub and looked for the nearest bar stools. Randy, placid and easy-going, surprised his friends by saying, ‘We’re probably wasting our time looking for something that’s not there.’ He seemed more anxious than anything to get his lips on a pint mug, rather than pound the streets looking for houses.

Sitting on a bar stool, Joe turned to William and asked, ‘what’ll you have, mate?’

‘Oh, make mine a pint, with a chaser.’ [Scotch whiskey]

‘Same here,’ Randy chirped.

‘You will, will you,’ came the reply. ‘Fat chance on Navy pay.’

‘Just joking, beer is fine,’ the two said, holding tongues at the ready to quench their thirst.

Sitting on bar stools with pints in their hands, Randy and Joe commiserated over William's housing dilemma. As they downed one pint after the one, their concerns gradually faded into a misty euphoria. Taking extra care not to flip over the bar stools as they jumped off, the three left the pub singing happily on their way back to base.

The noise in the ship's engine room made it difficult for the sailors to hold a conversation. Hearing a thunderous order forced in his right ear, William held one hand over it, as he felt his feet rise from the floor. Turning round he looked into the face of his Chief Petty Officer and wondered if a reprimand was forthcoming due to arriving back at the barracks, slightly inebriated.

'Marshall,' said the voice, 'heard a house going for rent in Cosham. Go to it, when you're off duty.'

His hands covered in grease, William saluted, 'Thank you sir, thank you.'

When the officer disappeared within seconds of arriving and was out of sight, William hurried to where his mates were working to give them the news.

'What brought that on?' Randy cautiously queried. 'Unusual for CPO to bother with rating's personal matters.'

'No idea. What's more, I really don't care,' came William's fast response.

Two days after receiving the news, Randy, Joe and William caught a bus to Cosham, a stone's throw away from their shore base in Portsmouth, and arrived at the address written down on a piece of paper by the CPO.

Standing outside the empty semi-detached house they wondered how on earth to get in, without a key. Taking the initiative, William went to the front door of a neighbour's house and banged loudly on the knocker. A plump woman with long streaky ginger hair hanging over her shoulders who looked to be in her forties, gently opened the door. Eyes

popping like corks, she viewed the sailors standing on her doorstep with grins on their faces, wide as chimps.

‘Well, I never, the fleet has arrived,’ she spluttered, holding her fat arms across her heavy breasts. ‘What can I do for you good-looking sailors?’ she pertly asked.

William studied the suspicious look on the woman’s face and said to himself, ‘Even if she has the key, she’ll never give it to us.’ But he was not to be fobbed off!

‘Do you have the key to the house next door?’ William asked.

‘As a matter of fact, I do. The owner leaves it in my care.’

Not wishing to lose a minute, William told the woman he was given to understand the house was for rent, and he needed the front door key to get in.

As though sensing the urgency of the sailors’ visit, ‘Well, far as I know,’ she blurted, ‘the owner does want to rent it.’

Without another word she disappeared inside her house, leaving the door slightly ajar.

‘What do you make of that?’ asked Randy. ‘Bit of a queer one, if you ask me.’

The sailors stood patiently waiting on the doorstep, and were curious to know what sort of house this woman lived in. Before getting a chance to step over the threshold to peek inside, the woman came out of her door with the key in her left hand and handed it to William. Giving her a wide smile, he thanked her.

‘Mind you bring it back,’ she said, with a gleam in her eyes.

Before she could utter another word of advice, Joe urged his friends, ‘Come on mates, can’t waste any more time. Let’s go and take a look inside,’

Cautiously inserting the key inside the lock of the front door, William opened it for them to enter. Nostrils began to twitch as the musty smell inside made all three want to sneeze.

‘Gawd,’ said Joe holding a finger to his nose. ‘This place smells like Billingsgate fish market. What it needs is a bit of good salt air.’

Taking hold of the latches, he threw open all the windows.

‘That’s better,’ he laughed, as his nose continued to twitch.

The front door of the house led into a narrow passage at the end of which was the sitting and dining-cum-kitchen. From this area, French doors opened out onto a small garden with enough space to grow vegetables, and a spot for William’s son to play.

Leading from the front door, a staircase went up to the top floor with three bedrooms and a small bathroom which included a toilet. Taking note of everything, with future prospects of purchasing the house when he left the service, William could not believe his stroke of good luck!

Going from room to room he hummed, mentally planning what a coat of paint here and there would do to make the walls look cleaner and fresher. With his head in the clouds, and mind set, once the family moved in the house he would “dolly up” the place. Little did he envisage his days at Portsmouth were numbered. Overseas duty was about to be called.

Noting his mates were busy exploring and checking the bare floor boards downstairs for termites or dry rot, he ambled over to them. ‘Anything foreign down there?’ he questioned.

‘No, nothing here to worry about,’ chuckled Randy.

All three took a second look round the house, and nodded approval. Saying, ‘it’s got possibilities after a good scrub and clean-up,’ William closed and locked the front door.

He held the key in his right hand. With his left hand holding on to the knocker of the neighbour’s front door, he was about to bang on it when immediately, the door flew open! The woman with long streaky ginger hair stood inside. She gazed hard at the three sailors, standing near her doorstep.

William handed back the key to her and rubbing his hands together, laughed, ‘Won’t be long before I’ll need it again.’

The woman moved to get a closer look at the sailors at though she had something else on her mind. ‘Well, lads, see you sooner than later,’ she cried, giving them a wicked wink.

George West was a stocky man with a ruddy complexion, who came from a small farming community near the dales of Yorkshire. Throughout the war he felt duty-bound to help a serving sailor in His Majesty's Royal Navy. Albeit, with strong leanings toward assisting him spend his service money which, in his opinion, was money wisely spent.

William, and his two mates Randy and Joe, who tagged along for the ride, went to see Mr. West where he lived on the outskirts of Portsmouth. When the sailors arrived on his doorstep, with the aplomb of entertaining royalty, he invited them inside to his well-furnished living room. Pointing to Chippendale wing-back chairs, he offered them a seat. Seeing they were comfortably seated and had his full attention, Mr. West asked if they would like a drink. The minute he left the room, the sailors chatted without a pause as they pointed with fingers at the fine pieces of antique furniture.

'Well,' Joe whispered, 'he's not short of money with this lot. Just look at it. Must have cost a fortune.'

When Mr. West returned to the living room holding a tray of glasses with lemonade, the sailors were back in their seats and accepted with alacrity the glasses handed to them.

William was eager to achieve a done deal to rent the house in Cosham as soon as possible. The three were shortly due back at base and he didn't want to miss other plans they had made ahead of time for the evening's entertainment. Mr. West however did not appear to be in any hurry to negotiate and listening to all his humming and haggling, William thought he'd burst a blood vessel. But he was not prepared to leave until they had amicably agreed on the rent.

Randy and Joe patiently sat waiting for landlord and sailor to come to a compromise. Knowing William was not going to budge on what he considered a fair price, Mr. West finally succumbed and the two signed an agreement. Shaking hands with Mr. West whose face was now beet red from using up too much energy, William gave him a wide smile. Looking at his new landlord's countenance, William sensed he was as pleased to finally find a tenant capable of paying the monthly rent. It

didn't concern him that on-going raids in the area, at any time, could demolish his property. He wanted money now, and not wait to negotiate with a government who appeared to all intents and purposes a bit on the stingy side when it came to reimbursing the owners of war property damages.

As William was about to leave with his friends, Mr. West inquired, 'You know where to find the house key, don't you, lad?'

William nodded. 'Okay if I paint up the house a bit?'

'Of course, lad,' replied Mr. West, enthusiastically, excited at the thought of seeing new paint inside and outside the house, in the hope it increased the value of his property. 'I'm sure you'll do a good job with the help of your pals,' he added.

'Next time you're on leave, look me up. You and your friends can meet me for a few pints in the local.'

Paying Mr. West his month's rent in advance, William left with his companions, jingling the few coins he had left in his trouser pocket. Chatting non-stop, they returned to Portsmouth and on the way popped in for a quickie at the local pub, excited as school boys on a sports outing, before heading back to base.

William decided he would not give Violet the good news he had rented a house in Cosham until it was squeaky clean and freshly-coated with paint. Randy and Joe helped willingly with the painting but were to constantly remind him, 'you owe us.'

On a hot summer day in August and a clear blue sky, the three sailors stood outside the barrack gates. Tall beech trees lined the entrance to the base, and a gentle breeze off the ocean caused the branches on the trees to sway in rhythmic motion. With noses held skyward, our three friends inhaled the salty sea air. 'Smells so good,' remarked Joe. 'Enough to make one want to drink it.'

Randy and William looked at one another and couldn't believe what

they had just heard. Joe getting all sloppy about wanting to drink salty sea air. ‘Me thinks,’ said Randy peering closer at Joe, ‘you need a stiff one.’

William’s request for compassionate leave was granted to allow him move his family from Kingston-upon-Thames, Surrey to their new home at Cosham. The three walked in step with each other as they left the barracks and headed toward the railway station to catch the train to Kingston. The southbound train from Portsmouth slowly chugged its way out of the station on command of the tubby porter wearing a black peaked cap who blew sharply on his whistle, while waving his green flag.

As they settled down in the seats inside a third class carriage, the sailors chatted humorously, while slyly giving the eye to other travellers. No girls aboard today. Just the elderly chancing a day’s outing to get them wherever they were going, in one piece. Before the sailors were aware they had arrived at their destination, carriage doors were flung open and passengers scurried toward the exit.

‘Why all the rush?’ asked Randy.

Cigarettes dangling from their mouths and bell bottoms swinging at a leisurely pace, the sailors reached the porter standing at the gate and handed him their railway passes. Looking at all three, the porter grinned, ‘Have a good time, lads,’ thinking all sailors came to Kingston for one reason, to “paint the town red”.

‘Sure will, mate,’ all three responded, laughing.

The porter shook his head.

Violet’s place of accommodation was a short distance from the railway station and with the help of Randy and Joe, William was able to pack her few belongings within less time than it took for them to walk from the railway station to where she lived on Richmond Road.

The Dwyers stood on the top landing, puffing on cigarettes, all the while casting wary eyes on the sailors as they packed the suitcases. When they were ready to leave Eric cocked his head toward Violet and said to no one in particular, ‘She’s the best renter we’ve ever had. We’re sorry to see her go. So quiet, we hardly knew a baby was in the flat.’

Looking at Eric and Lil, Violet thanked them.

‘Come back and see us, won’t you?’ they chortled, as the cigarettes held between their lips caused ash to fall to the floor each time they spoke.

Smiling, she carried Daniel, now fifteen months old, in her arms, and held on tight to William as they descended the narrow staircase. Randy and Joe following behind with the suitcases.

Once out on the street pavement William took in a deep breath, looked up at the sky, as though in prayer. ‘Thank the good Lord that’s over,’ with ne’er a thought of gazing back as they headed toward the railway station to catch the return train to Portsmouth.

William’s Navy pay was stretched to the point it did not allow him an opulent lifestyle. He was after all in His Majesty’s service, classified as a rating, and did not have the right to provoke the issue of earning more pay unless recognized by his superior officers that his engineering skills deemed him sufficiently well qualified for an increase. However, it was not beyond his powers to make use of his earnings to help with his family’s small comforts. When they arrived back at Portsmouth railway station, Randy and Joe returned to base saying, ‘See you later.’

Seeing a taxi pull up outside the station William stretched out his right arm, ‘Can you take us to Cosham?’ he asked the driver.

When they arrived at the front door of a semi-detached house William took a key from his pocket, unlocked the door, and ushered Violet inside. He put down the suitcases, then took his son from the arms of his mother. Violet walked slowly along the narrow hall from the front door as though on an exploration hunt, while sniffing the freshly-coated paint, hoping the smell from it would dissipate with time for the sake of her baby. Going into the living room she took a good look round and noticed it was sparsely furnished, with second-hand furniture. Seeing the disappointed look on her face William explained that he and his mates had bartered with a local dealer to buy the best pieces of furniture for sale, at the best price, including free delivery.

‘That is really all I can afford at this time,’ he said, feel slightly humbled.

Not wishing to appear ungrateful for his efforts to find her and her son a home, Violet shyly went over to him and planted a kiss on his cheek. Inspecting the living room further she noticed a small fireplace with marble-tiles surrounding it, in the centre wall. This appeared to be their only source to heat the house. The heavy black iron grate in the fireplace, orange with rust, looked as though it would disintegrate if anyone was foolish enough to try picking it up.

‘Where on Earth am I going to get the coal to put in the fireplace?’ she asked herself.

The upper floor of the house took on a new dimension to the new tenant. As Violet climbed the stairs her fingers touched the hairline cracks and small holes in the walls that were badly in need of repair, and cried out for a fresh coat of paint. If her husband was unable to do these repairs, she decided she would tackle the job herself.

Known as the “box” room, which is much smaller than the other two bedrooms, she chose this one for her baby son. Walking to the end of the landing she opened the door to the bathroom and toilet, peered inside, and paused. She imagined having a luxurious bath in the scented crystals William brought back from the Orient, and not having to breath in the smell of heavy cigarette smoke that hung in the Dwyer’s bathroom. It caused her to smile, as she quietly closed the door.

William’s compassionate leave ended all too soon. He returned to shore base at Portsmouth feeling happier than he had for a long time, with thoughts of his son playing in a garden.

Six months passed, during which time he served at different ports, and became proficient in the mechanics of the ship’s engines, gradually rising up through the ranks.

The three friends were back at Portsmouth when they received orders to report for overseas duty. Much to their chagrin, they would be on

different ships. But these were naval instructions and those serving in His Majesty's Royal Navy did not warrant a choice where they wished to be posted. To even think of challenging authority was tantamount to foundering a ship, and strong disciplinary action.

Shaking hands with one another, they hoped to meet up at one of the foreign British naval ports. Little did they realize their paths were never to cross again.

It wasn't long after mother and son moved into their new home, Violet found herself once again pregnant. Barely able to cope with moving into a house and looking after a fifteen-month-old boy, she wondered how she was going to manage without William who was somewhere sailing the high seas. Violet gave birth to her second son she christened Ralph.

William now held the rank of Petty Officer Engineer and was stationed at Malta when he received news of the birth of another son.

Whenever his ship docked at Singapore or Hong Kong, quicker than a wink, he hurriedly walked down the plank and headed to town looking for the best tailors where he ordered clothes to be made for his wife and children. Silk robes, satin lingerie, silk blouses, and handmade suits of the best quality material for his small sons. That he could enter any tailor's shop in these bustling cities early morning and return later in the day to pick up a new suit, left him pleasantly surprised.

'No wonder they prosper,' he said to himself.

One way he spent his hard earned money wisely was to buy tea and coffee sets of exquisite bone china in designs of bright red, gold and blue. A teacup when turned toward the light, showed the face of a geisha girl inside the bottom of the cup. The effect of the artist's work caused one to wonder how this image inside a cup could be effectively achieved, without cracking the delicate bone china.

William enjoyed these excursions, often alone, when his sea legs were on dry land. Browsing at leisure in the markets and stopping at various stalls, if he saw something he thought Violet would like he bought it without a second thought. When he presented her with gifts from the Orient, he studied her face as she opened each package and

removed each item, with a curious eye. Perhaps wondering if there were other surprises, yet to unfold.

The oriental customs and cultures of Singapore and Hong Kong fascinated William. Keeping strictly within the rules of naval discipline when going in to town with other crew members, he avoided the pitfalls of accepting a friendly Chinese girl's invitation to show him a good time. Most invitations appeared innocent enough to sailors who had sailed the high seas for months, with only the crying birds or the creatures below the deep ocean for company, but to later discover they were tantalized with misguided thoughts, "fools suffer gladly", and end up with the pox. The excruciating pain on a sailor's face as he padded to the sick bay, was enough to steer William on the straight and narrow. He was determined not to be enticed to go down this avenue, and avoided it at all cost.

Hong Kong, formerly a desolate island, was occupied in 1841 by the British and became a colony. Its sole purpose was to create a trade centre free from Chinese control. In 1898 new territories of the Kowloon Peninsula and adjacent islands were added to the crown colony and leased to Britain for 99 years when the islands would be reclaimed by the Chinese.

Singapore became a separate crown colony in 1946. The city of Singapore is on the south shore. On the north shore is a British air and naval base area. When the country was invaded by the Japanese Malaya campaign in 1942, it was known as Shonan under Japanese occupation.

The Mediterranean island of Malta, another crown colony, was vital to the British defense line. During the Second World War, severe bombings damaged its art treasures beyond repair. The Grand and the Marsamuscetto Harbours were fiercely guarded by the Allies to prevent serious damage to those Merchant Service ships carrying food and oil for the people of Malta, that needed to enter the harbour safely.

According to William, this was often a "miss and hit" run, as Malta was targeted relentlessly by the enemy to stop merchant ships from dropping off essential supplies to Malta. When the sirens wailed of an

incoming attack, people fled to their concrete bunkers, fearful of what would greet them when they resurfaced to the sound of all clear.

San Francisco's Golden Gate boasts one of the finest harbours in the world. His Majesty's Royal Navy ships docked here on several occasions, with William aboard. When the locals, maidenly and matronly, heard or saw the ship was ready to dock, they welcomed the sailors with open arms.

He told me the story of one gentleman he and his Navy companions met, when they were downing a cool beer in one of the cocktail bars. He invited one and all back to his house. The party began in full swing and with justice to their host's hospitality, they sang and drank various wines and alcohol in the company of several beautiful Californian girls. He couldn't remember how the evening ended but it caused the entire Navy party to sleep well into the hours of next morning, thereby missing their ship as it sailed majestically out of San Francisco's harbour!

Of the many Navy tales I heard from my brother, this one, I thought, "takes the cake." I could but imagine the sheer look of surprise on their faces, knowing in the hours to come all would be required to face their captain with a full explanation.

Experiencing worldly travels, normally beyond his reach, William took to Navy life like a duck to water and revelled in a lifestyle second to none. His preference was the Pacific Ocean, rather than the cold Atlantic. His admiration of American hospitality overwhelmed him. He could not get enough of their free lifestyle and ventured to imagine perhaps one day he and his family would emigrate to the land of plenty. In his observation, the Americans did not differentiate in ranks. All members of the service were treated equally and royally.

The Second World War had been over for two years and the millions of people living across different continents were slowly getting their lives back to some normality. Britain continued to be under rations for food and other commodities until 1949. Many parts of Europe badly demolished of the essentials of life, looked toward the conquerors of the war to help them rebuild their lives and communities.

No longer wearing bell bottom trousers and his Navy blue hat slung on the back of his head, William now sported the uniform of Petty Officer, showing three gold strips on the sleeves of his jacket and wearing a white cap with a shiny black peak and the Royal Navy crest above. His official portrait taken in the studio of Kwong Ming, Hong Kong, shows the face of a happy man.

Back in the swing of ships, amid swirling oceans to foreign ports, he was acutely aware of his responsibilities not only to his King and country whose uniform he wore with pride for the second time, but to the family he left behind.

Two years prior to William's discharge from the Royal Navy in 1969, after completing 26 years service at the age of forty-five, my own family and I emigrated to Canada. Elizabeth and William kept in close touch with me, and we caught up with family news across both continents.

It was many years later when I learned of the numerous operations he had undergone during his time in the service. This turn of event came about on one of my visits to him, when he showed me the scars from the surgeon's knife that went round his entire body. I was horrified. It was like looking at a criss-cross section of railway lines that mapped the circumference of his inner organs, to remove one kidney. If other organs had been removed, he didn't say. Seeing the scars caused me to wonder if this was the reason why he endured so much pain, over the years.

While convalescing in one of the overseas hospitals, in order to keep his mind and fingers occupied, he learned the art of embroidery and rug-making, as an occupational therapy. The work he did was remarkable. I had to admit, I could not have done better, despite priding myself on being a first-class needle woman. What surprised me further, was to hear how he so thoroughly enjoyed doing embroidery or using a hook to make rugs, notwithstanding many of his cohorts who visited him in the hospital and teased him it was a woman's work. But he was not alone in this therapy, during a time of healing. Other patients in his ward took the same interest in a variety of artwork to keep themselves busy and

created unusual designs and colours on canvas using either a brush or an embroidery needle, all looking quite professional.

Whenever I took it upon myself to question what his ship did at various British foreign ports he was reluctant to give full details, particularly if it was involved in some kind of political skirmish. Perhaps he thought he was still under the scrutiny of *The Official Secrets Act*. He never divulged information regardless of my being interested in it or not, perhaps with the view he had now left the service and to leave well enough alone.

The Island of Malta was a pivotal place of interest to most seamen, and the friendliness of its people was famous. The island's monkeys, however, kept everyone on the hop, locals and visitors alike who sat on the famous rocks eating food; this was a temptation for a monkey to grab the food from one's hand, without warning.

The population of Malta were dangerously close to starvation in the 1940s. By running the gauntlet through enemy air and land attacks, Allied Merchant ships were able to drop off supplies necessary for their survival. History records many Merchant ships and their crews were lost in supplying essential raw materials to other strategic points in and around the Atlantic regions. When William and I talked about this period in our lives, and surviving in different parts of the world, he would simply shake his head.

On one of our frequent ferry trips from Portsmouth to Shanklin, a sandy beach resort in the Isle of Wight, as soon as the ship docked, the family headed uphill to the only haberdashery shop in the small town to buy tablecloths, tea tray cloths, chair back covers and arm rests made from good linen. Also purchased were colourful skeins of Clarke's thread to use on the stencilled designs. This was one stop on my itinerary I did not want to miss. What surprised me though was the interest William took in every piece of linen I purchased. I had no idea then how talented he was with the sewing needle. It wasn't until we returned to his home

I realized his interest in embroidery work, as he studied the stencilled designs on each piece of linen. There was no stopping either of us after this. We chose to compete like soldiers on a battlefield, to see who could produce the best piece of needlework in design and colour. On par with my finger dexterity, William used the needle with remarkable skill.

Once our purchases were made in the haberdashery shop, we lunched at the local fish and chip restaurant, then made our way down to the sandy shore before catching the ferry back to Portsmouth. If the weather was good it made for an enjoyable day; however when it rained Shanklin was surely damp, cold and miserable.

PORTRAITS OF HIMSELF



Every other year I continued with my visits to the UK, and noticed Daniel and Ralph were getting close to six feet tall. Both were extremely good-looking. I wondered where this tallness in the family came from as their parents were of average height. Perhaps a throw-back to previous generations? Gentle Daniel had his mother's black curly hair. Ralph, who was the spitting image of his father, had yet to develop his sense of humour.

William was onboard ship out from the British Crown colony of Singapore, adjacent to Christmas Islands and Cocos Islands in the Indian Ocean, when Violet gave birth to her daughter Amanda, nearly ten years after the birth of her son Ralph.

In 1836 Charles Darwin based his coral-reef formation theory on observations made on Cocos Islands. These islands were discovered in 1609 by Captain William Keeling, hence the oft-used identification as Cocos (Keeling) Islands. They were first settled by Scottish and English merchants in the 1830s. The islands served as important air bases in Second World War.

The youngest child of the family, Amanda was horribly spoiled. She had only to sniffle, which caused her family to console her every need. Often, I watched William furtively slip a hand in his trouser pocket for

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



CAROLINE WHITEHEAD was born in London, England, and raised in an orphanage in Kent. Knowing the importance of family relationships, she pushed forward for forty years to discover her brothers' and sisters' identities, overcoming many obstacles so the siblings could experience those ties – and their stories could finally be told in a sequence of three books.

Married in 1944, she emigrated to Canada in 1967 and lived in Ontario before moving to British Columbia in 1987. Her husband died in 1999. She has one daughter, three grandchildren, two great-grandchildren, and a wealth of proud memories.