The Beginning

I suppose the first question should be what made want to become a Radio Officer in the Merchant Navy in the first place? After all, I had no connections with the sea, and none of even my distant family were sea farers.

I think it all started when I began working, at a radio and TV repair shop during the weekends, to earn a few pennies extra pocket money. Up until that time, I knew I wanted a technical job of some sort, and had vague thoughts about joining the Royal Air Force or Royal Navy. Both had a lot of high-tech equipment, excellent training as well as allowing one to travel around a bit. I was not however sure I could settle for the discipline and regimentation both services also contained. I had never even thought of the Merchant Navy, and never knew there were such things as Radio Officers then. Its not something that was publicised very much. If anything, the Merchant Navy had a rather sordid public image, despite its heroic efforts during the 2nd World War. Mental pictures of drunken sailors, rough callous officers, and men who had one or more girls in every port were far more frequent than those of the truth, which was that of a hard working, dedicated band of highly skilled people. Just how hard working and dedicated they really are, I only found out later.

Whilst still at school, I had a part time job on Saturdays working at Mildemay Electronics, a small radio and TV shop in Chelmsford, repairing radios, TV's, electric irons and other assorted household electrical equipment. It was very convenient, being just around the corner from where I lived, and gave me a bit of pocket money. My father knew the owner, as he was one of his own customers, so it was not too difficult to convince him to give me a job at weekends. The shop had a repair engineer working full time called Derek Chard. I obviously got to know him as we worked together in the workshop. He was about 26 years old, had recently left the sea having got married, and had not wanted to continue his sea going career. He was an ex Radio Officer. We became friends, and I used to spend quite a bit of time with him, experimenting, constructing various electronic gadgets and making radio control systems for model boats (some of which went disastrously wrong, requiring long cold hours of waiting at lakes, and the throwing of many stones! Such was my introduction to ships – albeit only model ones). He explained some of the work he had done at sea, and the places he had visited. This all awoke an intense interest in me, and I resolved to try a job in that direction.

A few enquiries at the Marconi Marine Company (conveniently located just up the road), showed that they would only be too pleased to employ me once I became qualified. It seemed they were looking for likely people to expand their team of Radio Officers. I was only 14 years old at that point, but now had a firm goal in mind. As I needed science and maths "O" level GCE qualifications to start the studies, I left the Blessed John Payne school when I was 15, as they did not offer all the subjects I required at that time.

I took a "further studies" course at Braintree College of Further Education culminating in 4 GCE "O" levels after a 2 year course of study. They were English, Mathematics, Physics and Chemistry. The Chemistry master implored me to take up chemistry and to study further for my "A" levels, as he thought I was a "natural" and consistently got 95 percent or more in his exams. Although I was interested in Chemistry, and enjoyed it, I wanted to travel, and doubted a chemist would get around much. I was sure that a job as a Marine Radio Officer was what I wanted. Even at this point I was very interested in radio communications and electronics. I had badgered my parents into buying me a second hand R1155, an ex wartime RAF communications receiver for my birthday, which I used to tune around the short wave bands. It was a lot better than the old broadcast radio I had used up until then.

One of the instructors at Braintree was a radio amateur with the callsign G3MUL. With his encouragement we started a small Amateur Radioclub at the college, based in the physics lab. We built small construction projects and even operated a small exhibition station for the College at its annual open day. When I had got my GCE's, I left Braintree and enrolled at Dagenham Technical College in their MRO (Marine Radio Officers) course.

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