

## RNIOs and Royal Naval Schools: THE STORY OF TAL-HANDAQ SCHOOL (From the 1974 School Magazine)

By Jacqueline Yule

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Staff of Tal Handak 1954

Back Row: Mr Bletcher Mr Green  
3rd Row: Miss Layard Mr Lett Mr Edgell Mr Walker Mr Storm Lt Keyworth Mr Knight  
2nd Row: Miss Davies Mrs Easlick Ms Matthews Miss Rippin Miss Prudames Mrs Cross Mr Coleseil Mr Ruoff  
Front Row: Lt Page Miss Knowles Mrs Martin Mrs Coleseil Cdr Bellamy Miss Yule Miss Clarke Mrs Fisher Lt Blamey

I do not claim that this is an accurate history of Tal Handaq but as far as possible the facts are correct. It is, however, a sincere account of my memories and impressions of twenty-two years on the staff of what I joined as the Royal Naval Children's School, Malta, and which in 1969 became the Service Children School, Tal Handaq.

Few, on arriving at the door leading to the Administration Block, notice on the opposite side of the driveway the date '1950' engraved above the door of the Assembly Hall. It is a landmark in the history of the school as it sets the seal on the achievement of the first post-war Headmaster, Instructor Lieutenant Commander (later to become Instructor Captain) A H Miles, who in 1946 had been appointed to re-open 'HM Dockyard Children's School.' Lieutenant Commander Miles was the right man for this job as he had been on the staff from 1934 to 1940. It is perhaps worth quoting from his foreword to the first post-war school magazine, dated July 1947:

'This magazine marks the beginning of a new era in the life of the Dockyard School. The 'Old School' began life in what was then known as the Dining Hall in Sheer Bastion during the year 1903. There it remained for seven years until, in 1910, a large house (later to become the Dockyard Subordinate Officers' Club and subsequently destroyed by bombing) near Isola Gate in Senglea, was taken over for use as a school. In 1928 still larger quarters were required and the school was moved to Verdala where it continued until, with the entry of Italy into the war in 1940, it was hurriedly evacuated to St George's Barracks, to carry on, in spite of great difficulties and dangers, until September 1942.

Presumably in those days the school was of the standard 'Elementary School' pattern prevalent in England before the 1944 Education Act, taking pupils up to the then school

leaving age of 14. Lieutenant Cdr Miles opened the 'New School' (still known as the Dockyard Children's School) in two semi-detached villas, 'Sunshine' and 'Seafoam', in Ta' Xbiex on 16 May 1946. It was an all-age school with 95 pupils and five staff, the other four being two Naval Instructor Lieutenants and their wives. Mrs Miles was the school secretary so it was a fairly close-knit organisation.

Numbers increased rapidly and in January 1947 they moved to a disused emergency Army Barracks at Tal Handaq, with 270 pupils and 11 staff. How many realise that the tombstone-like slab by the flag-staff is a memorial to the Royal Artillery battery which was stationed at Tal Handaq during the war years? On 15 July 1947 the school's name was changed to the "Naval Children's School".

When I joined the staff in September 1949 the school was physically much as it is now from the top gate down as far as the Assembly Hall, which was then in process of building. Some of the blocks were still only one-storey buildings and the gym and all other buildings now beyond the hall did not exist.

It may interest readers to know that Tal Handaq had been built in the form of one-storey buildings in order to hoodwink the enemy into thinking it was an innocuous Maltese village instead of an anti-aircraft battery. Traces of the Army's occupation were to be seen in the many bars still at the windows and it was rumoured that the Women's Staff room had formerly been the Guard Room.

During the first years the school had been an all-age one but with the re-opening of Verdala School in 1949 the infants and juniors gradually began to be absorbed into what became Verdala Junior Naval School, although the Tal Handaq Headmaster remained in charge of both.

During the first few years the school grew apace. It was in June 1950 that the first UK-based teachers were appointed. Previously that staff had consisted of the Headmaster with several Royal Naval Instructor Officers and locally entered women teachers, many of whom were the wives of Service personnel. This resulted in frequent changes of staff and so, in order to introduce greater stability and academic continuity, it was decided to appoint, from England, experienced teachers, originally on a three-year contract. The first to arrive were Heads of Departments and the school is especially grateful to Messrs Edgell and Ruoff (History and Geography respectively) who each remained for at least nine years.

Instructor Commander Miles (who was awarded the OBE for his work at the school) was succeeded as Headmaster in January 1951 by Instructor Commander A J Bellamy (later to become Instructor Rear Admiral and Director of the Naval Education Service). Total numbers in the two schools had by this time risen to over 1,000 and were still increasing. Commander Bellamy was succeeded by Commander Instructor Commander B J Morgan, who was promoted to Captain in the job and who (as Instructor Rear Admiral) is the present Director of the Naval Education Service.

During these years the building went on apace. Firstly, second floors were added to most of the single-storey buildings and then what had been part of the field blossomed with Romney huts (present blocks 13 to 16 and 21 to 28). The Music Room was the last to be completed, shortly after Captain Morgan had been relieved by Captain Mannering in

1959. It was also about this time that numbers reached an all-time high with 1,050 in the Secondary School alone.

At first the school was Bi-Lateral and in 1949 there was one Grammar and one Modern class in each year. The Grammar candidates sat for the Oxford GCE and the Modern took the RSA examinations.

Tal Handaq already had a couple of tennis courts and cricket practice nets but it was in Captain Mannering's time that extra tennis courts were built. Before the 'Agreement' in 1972 the Services provided pitches for rugby, soccer and hockey. Now some of these have been handed back to the Malta Government. Until the closure of HMS Ricasoli the swimming sports were held at the Fleet Lido there, just inside the entrance to Grand Harbour and I think it was then, with Fort St. Angelo and Bighi in the foreground, that we most felt we were part of the Royal Navy.

Captain Mannering was succeeded by Captain Broad who had the sports field at the top of the lane resurfaced. Unfortunately this ground has been rarely used, chiefly on account of the fact that the sheds meant for storage of equipment were constantly broken into and valuable contents stolen. Also the distance curtailed the time spent on games (the field could not be approached by bus).

With Malta's approaching independence the numbers of pupils at last began to decline during the run-down of the early 1960s, and in 1964 it was possible to allocate two classrooms to form what is now the library. Later, when Captain Malkin was Headmaster, others were converted into the Cinema and Language Laboratory and the Science (Laboratories were further improved and expanded. Since then there have been no new buildings but various improvements in the layout of specialist rooms have been effected and modern educational aids have been installed.

Academically the school has kept pace with its counterparts in Great Britain. With the introduction of the CSE it was decided to be affiliated to the Southern Region and the Tal Handaq representative has attended their meetings at Southampton. In 1962 the school became comprehensive: the first, second and third years were virtually streamed but the fourth and fifth years were 'setted' and allowed to select their subjects from a list of options. The Sixth year was divided into those taking A Levels and those who wished to continue at school but had not the qualifications to embark on an A Level course. They were, however, able to continue at O Level and CSE and had opportunities to follow vocational courses.

At three-yearly intervals Her Majesty's Inspectors have visited the school while for the last ten years, two Careers Officers from England have interviewed the senior boys and girls.

The School has always shown a very keen interest in Dramatics and for many years the end of the Christmas term was celebrated by either a straight play or a Gilbert & Sullivan production, all of which reached a high standard. These productions were an example of the excellent coordination of the various departments and much credit can be given to the Art, Woodwork, and Needlework departments who contributed so much to the visual effects.

As with all schools, Tal Handaq has had its ups and downs but few can boast of literally arising phoenix-like from the ashes. I had myself retired in July 1971 but I assisted in the "close down" in January 1972 for I helped in the business of

packing up practically everything that could be packed. The school was virtually stripped of everything that could be squeezed into the packing cases. These were dispatched to Bicester and for the most part returned in July 1973 intact.

Commander Law (later to become Captain), the present Headmaster, had the responsibility for this sad task and when I said goodbye to him I little thought that the school would re-open again. However in September it did.

The present Tal Handaq, though much depleted in numbers, nourishes and preserves the same spirit that has helped to make it a happy progressive school for both staff and pupils.

Jacqueline Yule.

### **"MISS J YULE MBE by Instructor Captain MF Law (Extract from the 1970 Tal Handaq magazine.)**

The Queen's Official Birthday, 1970, was the occasion of more than usual celebration at Tal Handaq. Past and present pupils, staff and friends of the school were delighted to see that Miss Yule's long and devoted service had been officially recognised by the notification in the Birthday Honours List that she had been appointed a Member of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire. Seldom can an honour have been more well deserved.

Jacqueline Yule came to Malta in 1937, when her mother, then a widow, decided to settle here. She taught for a short time at Chiswick House and then from 1938 to 1949 was employed by the Malta Government, teaching English at the Lyceum. She was thus here throughout the war (a lifetime's experience in itself) and during that time guided the English studies of a very large number of Maltese. Little wonder, then, that she is so well known in the island today: in almost any group of Maltese people there is likely to be someone who has been taught English by Miss Yule. In 1949 she was invited by the then Headmaster, Instructor Captain Miles, to join the staff of the Royal Naval School, which was then an all-age school and had just moved to Tal Handaq from cramped quarters at Ta'Xbiex. She joined the ranks of the indispensable, but under-rewarded, locally entered teachers, people with full British/teaching qualifications and/or degrees but who are recruited in Malta on local rates of pay. The difference in those days was that all the Tal Handaq civilian teachers were in this category, and Miss Yule remembers that when the first UK-based teachers were appointed, with British rates of pay and full allowances, they were regarded with some initial suspicion!

She joined the staff as Head of the English Department, a post which she held until 1967, when she relinquished it to devote more time to her other duties. She became Senior Mistress in 1956. No-one could have served the school more devotedly and selflessly and her firm but kindly handling of the Headmasters' feminine problems has earned her the respect of several generations of staff and students.

MFL"

### **RNIOA Postscript, January 2019.**

Readers are encouraged to visit the Tal-Hadaq website (provided under the title of this article), which has a wealth of material and images on the history of schools in Malta.