Service Story of Lieutenant Commander Alastair (Al) Williamson RN

In 1956 I sat the Civil Service exam and finished up at Sandhurst. I had stated that the Royal Marines was my first choice but changed my mind. After the humiliation of the Suez crisis the Services were pruned, and so my next experience was Aberdeen University where I achieved an MA and BSc. I joined the university air squadron where David Murray (who would eventually go on to become the Chief Naval Instructor Officer) was one of the stars. After university I decided that only dark blue suits were left to complete my military experience, so in 1966, after a couple of weeks at Royal Naval Barracks Portsmouth (pre-HMS *Nelson* days), I was one of eight schoolies undergoing training at Royal Naval College (RNC) Greenwich. The first person I encountered was Commander Mike Holmes, whose younger sister had been a classmate at my primary school. From then on, the majority of my career was a race to be appointed to stone frigates before they "paid off". These included Her Majesty's Ships *St Vincent* (Gosport), *Condor* (Arbroath), *Goldcrest* (Haverfordwest), *Fulmar* (Lossiemouth), and *Sea Eagle* (Londonderry) all of which finished in the dust shortly after I left them, not to mention later casualties *Daedalus*, *Osprey*, *Vernon* and Royal Marines (RM) Deal. I am somewhat surprised that *Seahawk* (Helston) and *Warrior* (Northwood) are still going in 2020!

Instructor Lieutenant Alastair Williamson (rear row second from left) at RNC Greenwich, 1966

After Greenwich my first appointment was RM Deal (1966-69) where the main task was to repair the damage of 10 years' schooling to get RM recruits through the Naval Mathematics and English Test (NAMET). The Corps was very welcoming to the RN contingent (a Surgeon Captain (aka Rear Admiral Deal), Surgeon Cdr, Surgeon Lt Cdr, Dental Surgeon Lt (female) and nine schoolies) and WRNS (a Second Officer (2/0), a Third Officer (3/0) and numerous Wrens proud to wear Globe and Laurel cap tallies). We repaid them in the skill-at-arms by the Wrens winning the small-bore rifle competition and the Schoolies the pistol. I was privileged to be at Lt Col Vivian Dunn's Dining Out where the band at the start of the dinner consisted of 17 band officers playing instruments other than their own together with five brave RN officers. At the

end of the dinner the company was regaled by the music of one gypsy violinist (a bandana-wearing colonel Dunn). None of the band officers had ever seen him play his own principal instrument. Before leaving Deal, I was given my S206 (Confidential Officer's Report) and unlike the RN, the RM provided the complete report and not just the flimsy (a brief summary at the end of the S206). The CO recommended that I should attempt the commando course as he thought I would fit in. I made my excuses as I wanted to "cloud watch," i.e. join the Meteorology and Oceanography (METOC) subspecialisation.

Early 1969 saw me off to *Seahawk* to attend Part 1 (Met) of the Long Instructor Officer (LIO) course - and the tender mercies of Cdr Ken Alcock who was Officer-in-Charge (OIC) of the RN School of Meteorology and Oceanography (RNSOMO) at the time. One amusing incident occurred after the OIC built up the importance of a visit to the Control Tower to see a qualified operational forecaster produce a real forecast. However, he became incandescent when the duty forecaster displayed a chart with only one line drawn on it – yet had a full forecast in print.

Instructor Lieutenant Alastair Williamson (rear row right) HMS *Seahawk* 1969

The rest of the course went on to Part 2 (Education) of the LIO course while I headed to HMS *Vernon* to relieve Ed Steer in the Fleet Applied Oceanography Centre (FAOC). This lodger unit was headed by a Lt Cdr supported by a second schoolie, a 2/0 WRNS, an RAF Flight Lieutenant (coastal) and a CPO Torpedo and Anti-Submarine (TAS). The centre's task was to deal with all things military in the oceanographic world - sound in the sea, haloclines[1], thermoclines[2], internal waves[3], bathythermographs[4] (BTs), for the A/S world, and factors that affected mine warfare, e.g. bottom capture! The most time-consuming activity was sonar range prediction (pre-computers) which entailed hand-drawn sound paths. The course content could vary on the range prediction side depending on the sonar types used by the various navies

[1] Haloclines are layers in the sea where salinity changes more rapidly with depth than the layers above or below. They are common in regions of melting ice, fjords and river estuaries.

[2] Thermoclines are similar to haloclines except that they are layers where temperature, rather than salinity, changes more rapidly. Both markedly refract sound in water and are important when determining acoustic conditions for sonar range predictions.

[3] Internal waves in the ocean are gravity waves that propagate and oscillate, caused by density changes with depth that are the result of haloclines and thermoclines and must be taken into account when determining undersea acoustics.

[4] Bathythermographs are torpedo shaped sensors that measure vertical temperature profiles of the ocean. The RN commonly used an expendable version (XBT) to facilitate acoustic predictions for Anti-Submarine Warfare (ASW).

instructed. RAF maritime air crews were also instructed and as an extra were instructed in underwater aircraft escape in the HMS *Vernon* escape tank. One weekend the tank sprung a leak and part of the car park was flooded. When the Commander visited the scene on the following Monday, he was met by a family of yellow plastic ducks!

At one point I was geared up to go to the USA with an RAF colleague to give a presentation on the AOC's mission. My part of this was to map out the sequence of presentation and to produce the notes, aids and vu-graphs (real cutting-edge technology at the time). At the last moment, however, Captain Dick Fotheringham decided to head our party, so I was 'benched'. He was gracious enough to thank me for my work.

Instructor Lieutenant Alastair Williamson (rear row right) HMS *Vernon* 1969

A Dutch Met Officer and I joined the aircraft carrier HMS *Ark Royal* for a large NATO exercise mostly in the Norwegian Sea. Our task was to provide range predictions (mainly for Sonar Type 195) and to compare forecast with actual achieved ranges. Every evening METOC kicked off *Ark Royal*'s evening TV round-up. On the last night the Oceanography forecast was given in Dutch (inexplicably, no one commented). This short time in the *Ark* left me with two memories.

The first was that this was my initial encounter with the legendary Cdr (Tom) Marshall - the best forecaster I came across. The second was a split head and six stitches. The last part of the exercise had been conducted in a "helluva" storm (50ft+ waves) that cost *Ark* boat booms, a catwalk between two sponsons and 21 inflatable life rafts. Post storm the seas had calmed and *Ark* sailed towards Oslo in 'signing-on' weather. Sunday morning, sun shining, and I decided, after coffee, to leave the wardroom on 6 deck and head for the Met office. From 6 to 5 to 4 deck there was an almost continuous companionway with kick plates at the top of each flight to protect the coaming. The kick plate at deck 4 proved that a large Sub Lt was more powerful than evostick and that gravity must prevail.

I was emerging at 5 deck when I met the descending kick plate with my head. I then became less than popular with the duty part swabbing the teak deck (2) as I spilt blood on my way to the sick bay. Not popular too with the medical team who were celebrating a successful appendectomy carried out during the storm (no 'hurt certificate' for me!!)

Back in *Vernon*, it was back to normal duties and my continued life as players' secretary for the United Services Portsmouth hockey team. When I started, we were struggling to field a second team but having 'worked on' the club swingers (Physical Training Instructors or 'PTIs') I could on occasion run five teams even if it meant tackling sailors out shopping in local married quarters areas on a Saturday morning and chivvying RAF types at Thorney Island and Brize Norton. At *Vernon* I was occasionally added to sea trials teams to instruct/demonstrate the use of Expendable Bathythermographs (XBTs). On one occasion an Iranian ship was carrying out sea trials in the Solent and their lead officer was always demanding trials beyond the agreed specifications. The wardroom had a makeshift table, with the Iranian OIC sitting at the head of it. When the soup course was served, the RN Captain ordered (as demanded by the Iranian OIC), a 'crash stop' from high speed, thus proving soup can fly!

One glorious summer Sunday morning when I was duty security officer, the Duty Lieutenant Commander (DLC) said that he and the Officer of the Day (OOD) would be attending church on board and that he was not to be disturbed 'unless it was WW III'. Shortly thereafter the pier master told me that there was a strange launch trying to get alongside and the owner was saying that the Prime Minister (Edward Heath) was about to go sailing. He had just returned from Brussels where he had been talking about the UK joining the EEC. However, Number 10 had not informed the Dockyard, so I had great pleasure in beating the chaplain down the aisle and tapping the DLC on the shoulder to tell him and the OOD, that WW III had indeed, just been declared! The PM was given the full treatment from the three duty officers and the hastily assembled duty watch.

All good things come to an end and I left *Vernon* to return to HMS *Seahawk* for the long Met course. This was more like it. The OIC, Cdr Tom Marshall, had a very good approach to the individuals who made up our course. He took an interest in each person and trusted the course to keep a rein on any possible excesses. Also, my old mate from Aberdeen Air Squadron, David Murray, was the Education Officer at the time. My two course secondments were to *Daedalus* and *Fulmar.* The former allowed me to live back at the married quarters in Drayton on Portsdown Hill. I enjoyed driving in at sunrise and sharing the route with the odd deer, badger, or fox. The second was to *Fulmar* where the Senior Meteorological Officer's wife happened to be an ex-Wren forecaster. The senior forecaster was 1/O J. McC, a diminutive 'ball of fire' who had a very good rapport with the aircrews. At first sight she did not look like the multi-international sports star she was..... until she took command of her field or court.

Alastair Williamson (rear row centre) at HMS *Seahawk* in 1972

At the end of the course I was appointed to the Guided Missile Destroyer, HMS *Fife*, but first came Flight Deck Officer (FDO) Training and the 'dummy deck!' After being frightened to death by a particularly mad Wasp helicopter pilot, it was off to Gibraltar and HMS *Fife*. At Gib' the Governor's Steps saw a new navigator, new senior, new IO awaiting *Fife*. "Pontius" and I looked at each other as the ship approached at a fair rate of knots and collided with the cat/floating boat-

landing stage. It transpired that the Captain had allowed the out-going navigator to show off his ship-handling prowess. We proceeded back to Pompey and the time was well spent in getting flight, flight deck crew, and Flight Deck Officer One (FDO1), - me to trust each other day and night - at least on the flight deck. Off to Rosyth where we joined up with sister ships *Devonshire*, *Antrim* and *Glamorgan* to act as floating grandstands for Exercise 'Sally Forth'. Before we started, the Flag Officer questioned my forecast of further fog in the outer reaches of the estuary after clearance of the radiation/river fog we were currently experiencing. The Admiral stated that Pitreavie had forecast the first clearance but they also said that visibility would then remain clear. My Captain backed my local knowledge and sure enough, there was a short clearance before the haar[5] set in. The situation was a light easterly wind and I used the Northwood facsimile Sea Surface Temperature (SST) chart to work out the longitude that would give a clearance and briefed the Captain accordingly. We took on 18 one-star equivalents and above, civilian and military personnel to an exercise off the Forth. I held the exalted rank of commissioned deck chair attendant on the flight deck. The Defence Secretary at the time was so engrossed in the exercise that he had to be wakened by me at the end of one phase.

After this we sailed to Scapa and in gale force conditions, recovering our Admiral by Vertical Replenishment (VERTREP) to B gun platform as our own budgie (helicopter) had fouled our flight deck. Such are the perils of life as an FDO that I had to stick my legs through the guard rails in the eye of the ship and waving flags to guide a 'strange' Wessex clear of whip aerials (no health and safety then).

Not long after, we went on a tour of the Baltic, starting with a fairly sedate but enjoyable visit to Copenhagen and then on to Stockholm. On the approach through the archipelago we were met by the Crown Prince (present king) in a Sea Knight (Chinook type helicopter). Too big for our deck, the pilot touched his forward wheels on the deck to allow his passengers to alight. The pilot and I could not count that as a Deck Landing (DL) but I persuaded the bridge that the pilot wanted to practise his approach. He came in stern first and got his rear wheels on deck to give us a DL. I had to fix up a TV appearance/interview for our Captain and the embassy's opposite number was kind enough on completion to give me a tour of Stockholm in her lime green Mustang. Our Baltic tour ended with *Kieler Woche* (Kiel Week) where our pulling crews won their races. We were berthed next to two US training ships full of trainee Ensigns, and on the inner harbour opposite were berthed two German (ex US) destroyers, the *Rommel* and the *Moltke*.

HMS *Fife* (D20) at Kiel in 1973: (Wikipedia Q28737428 / CC BY-SA 3.0 DE. by Magnussen, Friedrich)

[5] Haar is the name given to a cold sea fog that commonly occurs on the East Coast of Northern England and Scotland between April and September. It occurs when warm air passes over the cold North Sea.

Back to Portsmouth where the ship was due a short dry-docking, and I'd hoped that would allow me to improve on my mainly lapsed education role. I organised classes and courses for the ship's company, but the Commander then had different ideas for me. My Leading Airman (LA) Met (and ship's postie), Geordie, went home on leave. Twenty minutes later I was sent for and told I had to be on board RFA *Olna* by 0900 Sunday (it was 1200 Saturday, meaning that a rushed journey with British Rail to Scotland ensued). I telephoned my wife at home to assemble my gear, grabbed what I had on board and I was off. British Rail got me to London in time to catch the Edinburgh train. I was met by the shore patrol at Waverley station and escorted to Rosyth. The gangway was removed as soon as I was on board. *Fife*'s Wessex joined us off the Scottish coast (unlike me, they had three days prior knowledge of the deployment). I provided forecasts for the RN ships in company (and the fishermen - they appreciated the forecasts, regularly providing us with fish but, unfortunately, I am a life-long veggie). With Geordie sunning himself on costa Tyne, I had to hand plot my own charts. My day stretched to around 16 hours because of FDO duties. The ship's FDO (the First Officer) was kept busy with frequent Replenishments at Sea (RAS).

This was taking place during the time of the Second Cod War. The fishing fleet were spread out to the north of Iceland with close support of the RN frigates. RFA *Olna* was stationed off the northeast corner of the island about 20 to 30 miles to the east of the fleet. The latest storm had passed to the east and a relatively warm dry Föhn type regime had settled in. In sight from *Olna* at a distance was a frigate that appeared upside down then right way up and this phenomenon repeated. The haze lightened round the image and the frigate remained right way up. Sunlight broke through the cloud layer and the pennant number was revealed as F37 (HMS *Jaguar*) known to be below the "normal" horizon, and not at about 3-4 degrees above the horizon. Used as I was to thermoclines and the like in the sonar world, I deduced that here was a similar atmospheric ducting effect known as *Fata Morgana*[6]. Later the ducting strengthened and F69 (HMS *Bacchante*) was seen right way up but again above the sea level. In reality she was actually a few miles further away. The smaller trawlers and the Icelandic Thor were not so clear. After a few hours the thermal inversion had broken down and the effect disappeared.

After three weeks we were relieved early in an extra-tropical storm between Iceland and Faroe, by *Olmeda*.

Back to Portsmouth and *Fife* was now out of dry dock. Gibraltar was the next target, accompanied by five frigates and RFA *Olna*. In a night-time severe gale off the Canary Isles it took 28 of us to put our budgie to bed. I was the only casualty as the turn plate at the hanger entrance caught my left knee and Nigel (the doctor) later drew two pints of fluid from it. He was training to be second FDO (non-operational) and the flight commander and I had to pass him off before I could be operated on and allowed to recuperate in my cabin. Easy decision.

Fife took me halfway round the world before I left the ship. We had an exercise with the French navy off Dakar where one ship had the somewhat windy international call sign of Foxtrot Alpha Romeo Tango. Then on to Port Elizabeth in South Africa where the ship's sports teams got to stretch their legs. Next was Gan where, umpiring a hockey match, I kept getting addressed by a Squadron Leader as "chief" as he thought no RN officers were bearded. He was quite surprised at the *Fife's* cocktail reception to find me meeting the guests as DLC at the brow. After that it was the Seychelles, Singapore, Subic Bay, and Hong Kong. Hong Kong gave my wife a chance to check up on me thanks to RAF Transport, which flew out a group of wives for the ship's self-maintenance period. Singapore (again), Brisbane, Wellington, Auckland, and Sydney followed. Finally, it was back to Singapore where I left the ship. My RAF flight landed at Fairford, Gloucestershire, where there were two Concords[7] and one Concorde sitting on the apron (01, 02, and 001).

[6] Fata Morgana is a complex form of superior mirage that is seen in a narrow band above the horizon and can occur when an atmospheric duct has formed due to a steep temperature inversion and, probably in this case, a significant hydrolapse. The term is Italian named after the Arthurian sorceress *Morgan le Fay* as these mirages were often seen in the Straits of Messina.

[7] RAF Fairford was used by the Concorde team during the test phase of the aircraft. 01 and 02 were the test aircraft and at the time they were still arguing about the spelling, so one was English and the other was French. 001 was the first production model.

My final RN appointment was to HMS *Warrior*, Northwood (the 'hole') in 1974, and the less said about that the better. One of my forecasts did cause a little banter with the Royal Yacht. The forecast contained the description "Low, 991 mb, 300 miles west of Blacksod Point[8]....." Back from Flag Officer Royal Yacht (FORY) came "I do not know Blacksod Point nor do I wish to know.....". Admiral Lewin, the CINCFLEET, said, tongue in cheek, that FORY should have known, but navigation was not his strong point. My next RY forecast started "Low x miles west of Summer Isles expected y miles north of Summer Isles.....". CINCFLEET approved the forecast and nothing more was heard.

I left the RN in 1976 and spent the next 27 years as a civilian forecaster with IMCOS Marine and then Ocean Routes. This period took me to Aberdeen for three months, Bahrain three months, Abu Dhabi 15 months, then six and a half years in Dubai in a one-man billet. The remainder of my working life was spent North Sea forecasting from Aberdeen and diverse oil sites. During this period, I met several retired schoolie METOCs working in similar roles.

[8] Blacksod Point is a navigational reference point on the west coast of the Republic of Ireland.