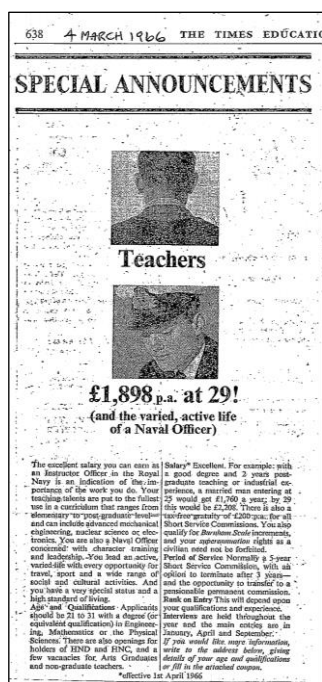




© Royal Navy Instructor Officers' Association, 2021 - all rights reserved

Service Story of Lt Cdr John Wheatley RN

A pretty average education saw me at the age of 18 going to Teacher Training College where I at last found my appetite for education and thoroughly enjoyed my time, finishing up with a Distinction in teaching practice and Student of the Year. This led to me getting a post at St Peter's School in Bournemouth in June 1964 where I spent the next two years.... until I saw an advertisement in the Times Educational Supplement in March 1966 for the Royal Navy Instructor Branch "Teachers £1,898 pa at 29" it said. Having always had a hankering after the sea, and with an uncle who was a Captain in the Merchant Navy (lost at Sea whilst on the Narvik run) I was intrigued at the thought of being able to combine teaching and the Navy. So I applied, was interviewed and was accepted for a short service commission of 5 years, joining in Portsmouth on 19th September 1966 for an intensive one-month course on how to be a Naval Officer.



Left: Times Educational Supplement advertisement; Right: New entry Course Sep 1966 RN Barracks Portsmouth – Instr Lt John Wheatley far left; Instr Lt George Harrison 3rd from right; Instr Lt Bill Norminton 2nd from right.

Source: John Wheatley, no known copyright issues

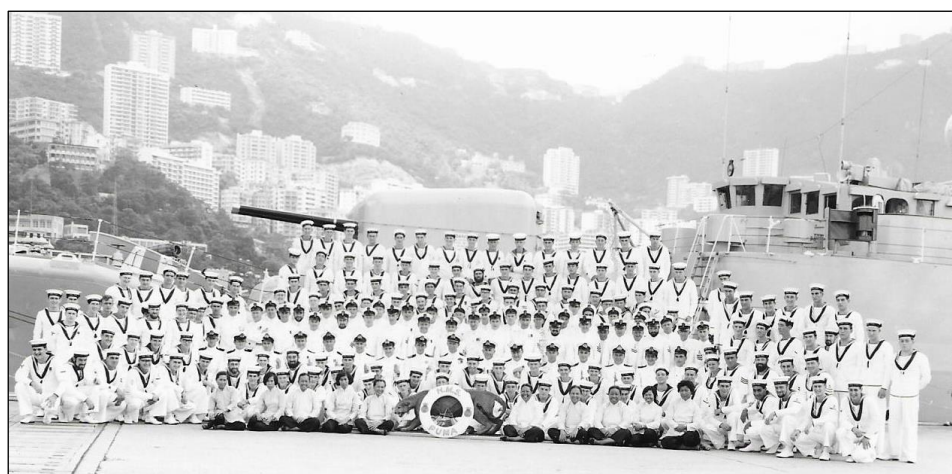
One month later found me making my way to my first appointment in HMS *Caledonia* in Rosyth. Wow! What a learning curve! The apprentices had all completed at least a year already at HMS *Fisgard* and obviously could see that this new officer was indeed "very new". But with some great colleagues, I soon settled in and started to enjoy the journey. With a musical upbringing, I soon got involved in the volunteer Brass Band and was shortly appointed their Band Officer. Highlights were taking the Band to play at the 1967 Royal Tournament and to the Scottish Cup Final in 1967 when Celtic beat Aberdeen and the Band played before, during the interval and after. In September of that year, less than a year after joining, I was summoned to the Senior Instructor Officer's (SIO's) office where Cdr Clifford Mount informed me that he had just had a call from the Appointer saying he was sending me to sea at the end of the year. Cdr Mount informed me that he told the Appointer

he must have the wrong person and to go back and check as “they don’t send short service instructor officers to sea”. He was awaiting a return call. The following day I was again called to see the SIO and told I **was** going to sea in January and what a lucky chap I was! I certainly was, and I think the envy of most of the other short service IOs at *Caledonia*.

The end of 1967 saw me joining HMS *Puma* as Education and Resettlement Officer to F1 in Plymouth just in time for the New Year celebrations. *Puma* was scheduled to sail for Singapore but was delayed with generator problems for a few weeks, but we eventually departed on 7th February and so started an amazing experience for this young officer, learning all about ship life, and getting involved as I could in everything going on. Bridge watch keeping was a new experience and one I loved and was therefore delighted to be awarded my Bridge Watch Keeping certificate before I left the ship. Of course, I was tasked with briefing the ship’s company over the ship’s radio on all the places we visited - Gibraltar, Freetown, Simonstown, Beira Patrol, Majunga, Beira Patrol again, Mombasa, patrolling the Arabian Sea in company of Her Majesty’s ships *Eagle*, *Albion* & *Phoebe*, and then lastly Singapore on 22nd May. As there was no internet in those days all research for this had to be done from guidebooks available on board and the knowledge of those who had been before! Five weeks in dry dock to replace a generator, saw me relocating to HMS *Terror* and assisting the IO Lt Cdr Paddy Lennon.



Left: Instr Lt Cdr Paddy Lennon and me, HMS *Terror*; Centre: a young-looking Lt Wheatley taken in Singapore; Right: at sea aboard HMS *Puma* disturbing the peace! Source: John Wheatley, no known copyright issues



The Ship’s company of HMS *Puma* in Hong Kong. Source: John Wheatley, no known copyright issues

On the 22nd May we departed Singapore for Hong Kong and Bangkok, before returning to Singapore after exercises. We were then despatched again to Hong Kong for an Assisted Maintenance Period (AMP) of four+ weeks – the first such managed by HMS *Tamar*, as a trial with a view to moving AMPs from Singapore, as the base there was to be closed.

Leaving Hong Kong on 15th September we briefly called in again to Singapore before exercising off the Australian coast followed by a week in Newcastle, departing then for the Fiji Islands (visiting Suva, Levuka, Koro, Savu Savu, Somo Somo, Labusa and Rotuma). Funafuti in the Gilbert & Ellice Islands (now Tuvalu) was our next stop where I remember being proudly shown in their visitors' book that we were the first RN ship to visit since the Second World War! Pearl Harbour and San Francisco were next, before a stop-off at Monterey that had close connections with HMS *Puma*, having been adopted by the city in 1959 when the Captain was appointed as High Sheriff in and for the County of Monterey and they gave the Ship's Company the Freedom of the Ports of Monterey City.

Due celebrations were had on our brief visit! Manzanillo in Mexico was followed by Bilbao and transit through the Panama Canal. Anchoring off Bluefields in Nicaragua, we were ferried ashore for a reception where the only drink available was neat whisky! Consequently, the trip back to the ship was very interesting!! We set sail the next day with quite a few sore heads for Kingston, then Puerto Rico and the Azores. After circumnavigating and having visited so many fascinating places we finished back in Guzz (Plymouth) on 19th December, having sailed 70,418 miles and been underway for 4,495 hours.

Awaiting me when we called into the Azores was a letter from the Appointer advising me that after we returned, and in view of my musical interests, he was sending me to the Royal Marines at Deal.



HMS *Puma*: Copyright Logan & Wright



HMS *Puma* (right) taking part in Replenishment at Sea (RAS) with HMS *Eagle* in the Arabian Sea

So, in January 1969, I rolled up at Deal Barracks and was appointed Education and Resettlement Officer. It turned out to be a life changing appointment! One anecdote – soon after arriving: I remember being in my office one morning with a class full of junior musicians in a classroom down the corridor and someone was banging a note persistently on the piano. I went to my door and shouted down the corridor “Stop banging that A above middle C NOW!”. There was a sudden silence. When I got down to the classroom a few minutes later, the first question I was asked was “How did you know what note it was, Sir?” “Perfect pitch” I replied. That got their attention and gained me credibility in their eyes! Deal had a fabulous theatre which was much underused, and I thought (with a background in Gilbert & Sullivan *et al*) it would be a great venue to put on some of their light operas. So I started the Gilbert & Sullivan Society. Within a year we had our first performance ready with staff and students and some local enthusiasts as actors and professors, staff and musicians in the orchestra, Band Sergeant Terry Williams as Producer and myself as Musical Director, the Society launched with a very successful production of *Yeomen of the Guard*. All six performances were a sell-out, and we made a vinyl LP of the production, a copy of which I still have. I often wondered what the Royal Marines Director of Music thought of a Schoolie musically directing at the RM School of Music, but he was entirely supportive throughout.

In November that year, I was delighted to hear that I had been accepted for a 16 year commission.

We were now well into our rehearsals for our second performance - of *Ruddigore* - when I was told that I was to be appointed to the Amphibious Training Unit at RM Poole (ATURM as it was then) in January 1971. After negotiations between the two Commanding Officers, it was agreed that I would spend three days at Poole and the Thursday, Friday and weekend at Deal until after the performances. That suited me on more than one front as my future wife was a teacher in Walmer just up the road from Deal.

As SIO at Poole, the main role was teaching navigation to the Landing Craft and Special Boat Section personnel, a job requiring a Bridge Watch keeping certificate which very few Instructor Officers had. This was required so one could take command of the Training vessel HMFT *Aberdovey* - the only Instructor Officer (I was told) who could draw Command Pay

(when in command of the vessel). Trips to the Channel Islands and Scilly Isles were frequent and an annual trip to Liverpool were all part of the itinerary.

I got married in April 1971, and we settled down in Poole. I decided that I wanted to make the Navy my career which meant getting a degree, so I signed up with the Open University and spent much of my spare time studying, and was delighted to be awarded a degree in early 1974.

September 1974 saw me moving north again to Scotland to HMS *Lochinvar* for a short appointment for a year before the closure of this base. After this, my next appointment was intended to be as Headmaster of the Childrens' School in Mauritius and we were looking forward to this married accompanied post, but the Government had other ideas and announced our withdrawal from Mauritius within the year, so a re-think was needed, and I finished up transferring over the river Forth to HMS *Cochrane* as Staff Instructor Officer to FOSNI and Education Officer for HMS *Cochrane* and for duty with Captain Mine Counter Measures/Captain Fishery Protection. April 1975 saw me embarked for a few weeks on HMS *Abdiel* on her way to the Suez Canal as mother ship for the Mine Clearance operations (Operation Rheostat). An extra watchkeeper was very welcome, once I had proved myself capable and I had another very interesting seagoing experience, seeing at first hand the destruction in and around the canal. All the time, I continued my studies with the OU and in December 1975 was awarded a 2:1 Honours degree. I then applied to transfer to the Permanent List and was delighted to get confirmation of this in March 1976 (which in June 1977 was absorbed into the General List).



HMS *Abdiel*, Source: John Wheatley, no known copyright issues

The beginning of 1977 saw me at RNC *Greenwich* for Staff Course 52 (one of only two IOs on the course, Alex Dunn being the other). Our Senior student was Mike Boyce who went on later to be Chief of Defence Staff (CDS). This was a challenging but very enjoyable six months which was followed by a 21-month appointment to Whitehall on the staff of the Director of Naval Education Service (DNEdS). During this time, I was advised that my next appointment would be as SIO at the Commando Training Centre Royal Marines (CTCRM). There was a desire that I attempt the Commando course, and though relatively fit, this was not something within my compass! So I started training seriously to get myself into shape.

I joined Lymington for the pre-Commando course in October 1979 and tried very hard but at the age of 37 the struggle was just too much and I was withdrawn from the course. I was a lot fitter but lack of sufficient upper body strength defeated me.

I continued at Lympstone as SIO and took a full part with the training of recruits and young instructor officers destined for the Commando units and enjoyed almost three years in this role.



Rear Admiral Trevor Spraggs - Chief Naval Instructor Officer (CNIO) - observing IO Commando training at CTCRM. Source: John Wheatley, no known copyright issues

However, with the announcement of a three-phase redundancy exercise (John Nott's Defence Review) and after due consideration, and with a young family who were only seeing me at weekends, I decided to apply for redundancy and was accepted. I was then appointed to HMS *Osprey* in Portland to see out my time, but because of the Falklands conflict, my appointer said he was sure I wouldn't mind seeing out my time back at RM Poole (where we still lived), as the incumbent had been despatched as an additional watchkeeper down to the Falklands, "oh -and by the way, you're number three on the list if we need more"! Fortunately (?), I wasn't needed. So come September 1982, I was back at RM Poole and shortly taking delivery of a new training vessel HMFT *Messina* (which we had been promised some eight years previously!). With the Falklands conflict in full swing, there was suddenly crash training to be done, as it was realised satellite navigation was needed by the Landing Craft (LCMs) in the Falklands as there was no Decca or Loran navigation system coverage there so suddenly we had all the equipment and had the satellite navigation system "satnav" to teach! I recall being moored alongside in St Peter Port, Guernsey going through some training and to the amusement of the trainees, the satnav placed us some 500 yds away in the pub! At least it illustrated that, at that time, satnav was only to be relied upon for approximate position and not when navigating in dangerous coastal waters!

After a marvellous career in the Royal Navy, I retired on 31st July 1983 and started a new career as a Director of Administration for a major City Law Firm in London where I remained until I finally retired. I was determined that the fitness I had gained in those last few years in the Navy would not be lost whilst doing a desk job, so I took up running and have continued doing this. I have run nine marathons (including seven London Marathons - 3hr 13min being my best time), over 100 half marathons and to date 325 parkruns, and still counting.