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Service Story of Lt Cdr Les Hewitt RN

I began my post-university career in Secondary and Further Education before joining the RN Instructor Branch in April 1973.

We were one of the first entries to go to sea in the Dartmouth Training Ship (DTS) - HMS *Intrepid*. I recall that eleven of us were dropped off in the Orkneys for survival training. Dressed in Seaman's number 8's uniform, Jerry Goodwin and I were given permission, rather foolishly, by the senior instructor officer, to escape into Kirkwall for the night having discovered a ladies' hockey club dance where of course we were the centre of attention.

We tried to hitchhike back to the ship and were picked up by a local farmer who took us back to his place for a slap-up breakfast and more whisky. We got a severe dressing down for this. My defence that we had showed considerable initiative was disregarded.



Lieutenant Les Hewitt RN aboard the training ship HMS *Intrepid* in 1973.

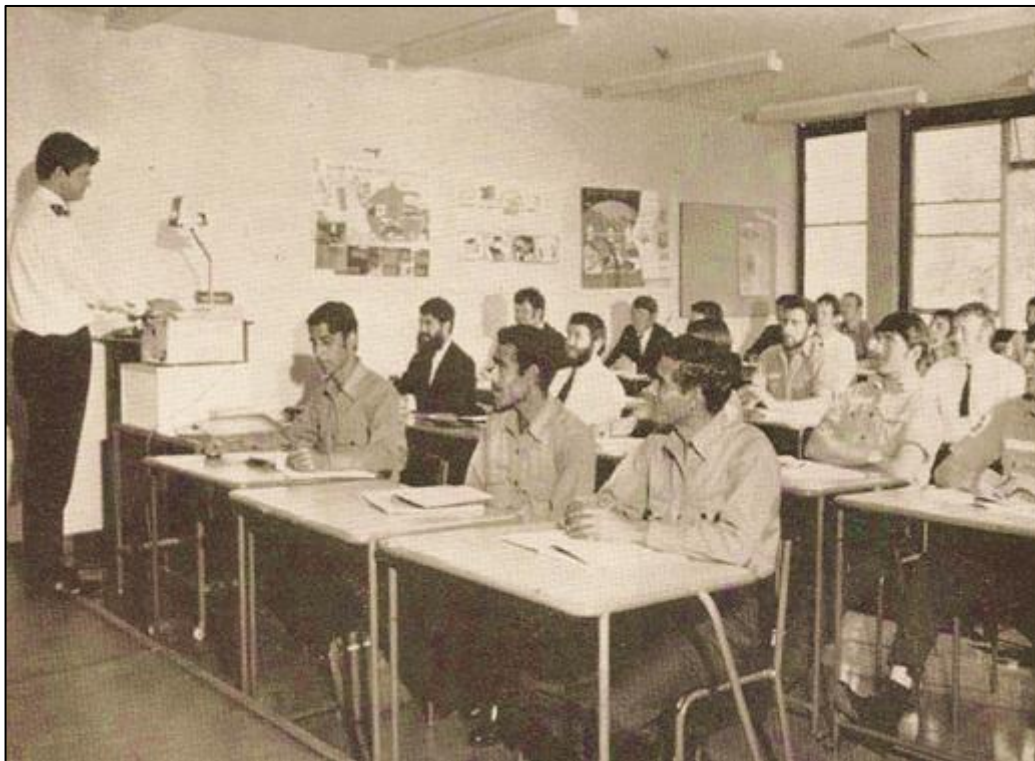
Source: Les Hewitt, all rights reserved

My first job at HMS *Collingwood* was Liberal Studies Officer. It was considered to be far too socialistic in connotation, so it was changed to 'Complementary Studies'. *Collingwood* was a great first appointment for "schoolies". I threw myself into sport (rugby and tennis) and drama. In 1974 we won the Naval Drama Festival with 'A Man for All Seasons' with Andrew

Allen playing Thomas More and Brian Coshall as the linking “common man”. Brian’s talent as a comedian and impersonator came to the fore – while still a serving officer, Brian won ITV’s pub entertainer of the year award. There were several moments in this play which had dramatic intensity including my soliloquy as Thomas Cromwell about “silence can speak”; this was addressed to the audience. The silence was broken by the Tannoy system requesting an artificer to report to the guardhouse! The professional adjudicator picked out what mistakenly he thought was a very original piece of theatre when the Duke of Norfolk, played by Cdr Bill Jack (the Principal Medical Officer), fell asleep during my long speech. This meant a new move whereby I strode across the stage and grabbed Bill by the arm and whispered, “it’s your line Sir”.

I left Collingwood in 1975 to join HMS *Sultan* where I also directed and produced plays, one of which was Alan Bennet’s *Habeas Corpus*. One of the characters unsuccessfully tries to commit suicide and in a fit of desperation comes onto the stage and stands on a chair with a noose around his neck. The hanging apparatus was hired from the Wolverhampton Repertory Company. Speedy Godwin who was playing this role threw himself enthusiastically off the chair and was left dangling by the neck as the harness had snapped. Fortunately, the Stage manager Mike Pengelly was able to dash onto the stage and cut him down as he was turning purple.

Luckily this was a dress rehearsal, but word of this incident got around the ship’s company and the following night we had a packed house.



Lt Les Hewitt teaching a class of senior Engineering Mechanics at HMS *Sultan*.
Source: Les Hewitt, all rights reserved.

I did direct and produce many plays and pantomimes: brave choices of mine included John Arden’s ‘Sergeant Musgraves Dance’ and George Bernard Shaw’s play, ‘Major Barbara’. Both had strong pacifist anti-war messages, so this was probably the start of the “Red Les” appellation.

During a required spell at sea on HMS *Hermes* (affectionately known as *Herpes*), the well-known aircraft carrier, in addition to education duties, I ran the closed-circuit television system, which was largely employed for inter-mess quizzes. I did, however, attempt to include some educational programmes. One of these was prior to my organising a trip to Washington DC from Norfolk VA. As I had given presentations on the American system of government, the trip included a visit to

Congress and the White House. This was attended by a handful of Warrant Officers who I was tutoring for an Open University degree, while the remainder of the rest of the ship's company disappeared down Pennsylvania Avenue to explore Washington's red-light district. My friend Ian Gallett joined as a meteorological officer in Mayport, Florida. Consequently, we were both able to participate in another trip that I organised, which focused more on cultural experiences rather than educational, namely Disney World in Orlando!

This was followed by three years on the staff of BRNC, Dartmouth from 1978 to 1980. One of the highlights was the arrival of our daughter, Emma. This meant several trips across the River Dart to Torbay Hospital in order to avoid long journeys around Newton Abbot after the last ferry. The ferry crew got to know my situation, so I was able to bypass the long traffic queues; I think I relied too much on west country innocence by continuing this tactic for the rest of my time at the College. I was affiliated to St George Division with Paul Branscombe and Jim Perowne (who later became Flag Officer Submarines - FOSM). We had a few Australians on the course, many of whom I reestablished contact with later when serving down under.

I completed a Rugby Union coaching course so I could become the Rugby Officer.



Rugby match between Britannia Royal Naval College and Royal Military College Sandhurst 1979.
Source: Les Hewitt, all rights reserved.

As I was too innumerate to attempt any such thing as a Met Course, I opted for the long Management Services Practitioners' Course at the Royal Military College of Science (RMCS), Shrivenham. Simon Goodall attended the same course. Simon inevitably became an Admiral while I had reached my level of incompetence in the rank of Lieutenant Commander. I then spent two years as the Flight Management Services Team (FMST) leader in Royal Naval Air Station (RNAS) Yeovilton joining in 1980.

I escaped the tedium of weekendening by getting a transfer to Commander-in-Chief Naval Home Command (CINCNVHOME) Portsmouth in 1982. This enabled me to seamlessly move back to the education world as Instructional Techniques Group Officer in the Royal Naval School of Educational and Training Technology (RNSETT), first under Brian Drinkall, then the indomitable Clive Lewis who convened his Head of Department (HOD) meetings in the Bridge Tavern. Keith Talbott and Dennis Dowsett were part of my team as was Hugh Pashley who tragically lost his life in the Herald of Free Enterprise ferry disaster, shortly after leaving the Navy.



Les Hewitt and the staff of RNSETT in 1982. Source: Les Hewitt, all rights reserved

Having been passed over for promotion or even an Extended Medium Career Commission (EMCC), there was an opportunity for a married accompanied with the Australian Navy based in HMAS *Cerberus*, Victoria in 1983. The two-year exchange turned into three to enable me to carry out an in-depth evaluation of the first in-country Surface Warfare Officers Course replacing the RN's PWO course in HMS *Dryad*. This task, combined with my role as Second-in-Command (2i/c) of the Royal Australian Navy School of Training Technology (RANSTT), took up most of my time and allowed me to travel around Australia to Canberra, Sydney and Perth etc. I also designed and managed a new Junior Officer Course (see photo below).



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There was a very active social life in the Mess; my wife and myself were invited to perform in a Noel Coward sketch, delivered in perfect received pronunciation except for the last lines which were written by an Ozzie as “up your bum” and “may all your chooks die shagger”. Shirley was in a flapper cocktail dress, and I wore a smoking jacket; the fact that we “poms” could make fools of ourselves went down a storm with the colonials. So, Australia was a great experience. Not least for our son who had a year in Monash university Melbourne; on our return he went to the University of York where his fellow students and lecturers probably assumed he was Australian as he had acquired the antipodean twang.

My last three years in the RN began in 1986 and were spent as Staff Officer Training Technology in HMS *Sultan*. The greatest satisfaction of this job was liaising with the Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) and City and Guilds to achieve external accreditation for a number of career and non-career courses for senior ratings. I was also able to complete a master's degree at Southampton University on day release. My dissertation was 'The Evaluation of Naval Technical Training' so the collation of all the data required was available on the job!

So, there we are, an interesting and varied career in the RNIO Specialisation. I left prematurely in November 1989, at the age of 45 but was able to have over 13 years civilian employment with Hughes Rediffusion Simulation Limited (HRSL), Data Sciences and finally IBM.