

Expedition Sailing at the School of Navigation

By Alec M Macpherson OBE

On completion of a four year Short Service Commission in the Royal Navy I joined the School of Navigation as a Lecturer in Mathematics and Physics in the autumn of 1961. A considerable amount of my time in the Navy had been taken up with sailing activities and one of these was the task of setting up what was called Expedition Sailing in Portsmouth Command. This involved arranging for a group of cutters and whalers from ships and establishments in Portsmouth to sail to a weekend rendezvous where the crews could camp and enjoy a relaxed time. I found that it was fairly important to arrange that the camp site was relatively near to a pub.

An unpopular duty at the School of Nav. for the lecturers was taking your turn as the SWW which involved living aboard all week from Monday including the following weekend. On Saturday morning the SWW had to take charge of boat handling instruction for a group of Cadets and normally this meant taking about 20 or 30 of them out in a heavy rowing galley and making them pull on their oars with gusto, but never achieve more than two knots. (*Alec could not remember the name of this craft, or what it was called by the Cadets. An online search reveals that it may have been a square-ended rowing barge named "Stubington", known as "The Torture Machine" and reportedly ballasted down with concrete to give it some grip. No doubt there will be other ex Warsash Cachalots out there to put us right. Ed*)

When my turn came up for SWW duty at the end of June 1962 I suggested that I take a party of Cadets away in gigs for the weekend, but Captain Whalley Wakeford and other top brass were horrified at the idea. No change to the normal routine was to be contemplated. I thought that they were very set in their ways. Eventually it was reluctantly agreed that I could take a sailing expedition outside the River Hamble for the day on Saturday.

At 1000 on Saturday 30th June our little flotilla set sail – 25 Cadets in 4 gigs, two in a dinghy and I took three in my yacht *Nighean Mhara*. I had a mooring on the mud north of the pier for my yacht which was a Mystic class built in Cowes and only 21' with no engine. I was the only member of staff. We did wear lifejackets. I do not think that the Health and Safety people would approve nowadays but I am convinced that activities like this are essential for young people to let them take charge in some way and have some freedom. The Cadets were well briefed about staying reasonably near one another and being responsible crews. Nobody let me down.

The weather was dull but dry and the tide just after neaps with LW early afternoon so we tacked round Calshot spit into a light wind from the SW. The tide carried us to the mouth of the Beaulieu River which we entered and tacked up to Bucklers Hard pulling the gigs onto the beach at 1430. In those days there was a small shop in Bucklers Hard and the lads headed there to buy lemonade, sweets, ice cream and probably cigarettes. We had a picnic lunch provided by the school kitchen sitting on the grass in that lovely environment.

At 1545 the boats all launched or cast off and set sail to find a cracking SW breeze blowing so we had a really fast and enjoyable run back to the Hamble with the tide under us. We were back on our moorings by 1830. They kept together quite well; never easy under sail. I am sure they all enjoyed the day and it made a fun change from the normal Saturday activities.

Footnote:

Readers may be interested to know that during that particular week while was SWW the staff were shown plans by Captain Wakeford for the new teaching block and social areas to be built which was a really good improvement for the School. We were all delighted at the prospect of these new premises.

Sadly, this very block is now empty and likely to be demolished in the near future. The likelihood of expedition sailing for Cadets from a venue in Southampton is now remote. Warsash was such an ideal location for the School – what a pity it has to move.



Alec sailing his yacht *Nighean Mhara* in Cambletown with his two sons on board, both now over 50 years old.