

A Shipyard Apprenticeship Part Two Cat and Mouse, and "Gimme ver board," and Student Nurses,

Surprisingly, I do not remember getting particularly dirty in the shipyard - except when I was on ship repair work. That was quite dirty. New building work was comparatively clean. Obvious, I suppose - there was never any oil in the bilges of new ships. No rats, no cockroaches, no sooty exhaust uptakes, no steam bugs, no oil leaks, no carbon dust in electrical rotating machines. But, I already digress; I intended to describe as briefly as possible what working conditions were like in the Belfast shipyards over sixty years ago.

So, in two words - primitive and crude. Worker welfare was practically nonexistent. Life and limb were regarded as cheap, and always had been, by the Company.

Oh, yes, there were first aid rooms dotted around the yards, and, by any standards, they were needed. I can fully understand just why the Health and Safety at Work Act of 1974 was deemed necessary - employers were simply not to be trusted without force of law. And Harland and Wolffs Belfast Shipyard was, sadly, a very typical bad example. But the Company did sponsor and encourage a St John Ambulance Brigade Division, of which I became an active member.

While it was not quite an everyday occurrence, the accident rate was high and deaths were not unknown. Workers had to be constantly aware of danger. And, frankly, that was not surprising because there was no obvious evidence of risk assessment. There was no safety awareness training. No hard hats. No protective clothing.

Consequently, there were no communal washrooms or changing facilities - they were not necessary. Everyone arrived and went home wearing their working clothes, traditionally bib-and-braces overalls for the labourers, the "blacktrades," the shipwrights (more commonly known as . . . *well, never mind, there are ladies present*) and the wood butchers and the hedgerow carpenters, blue or brown boilersuits for the higher orders - the electricians and the engine fitters.

Oh yes, we were all quite partisan about our various occupations, and occupational demarcation was total. There has been much criticism about demarcation, but, if you think about it, there was *some* logic to restrictive practices - after all, men trained and skilled in woodwork make good carpenters, while those trained in engine building tended to make good engine fitters, etc etc fitters, etc. But I will not deny that restrictive practices were conducted to ridiculous extremes by the workforce.

But I am becoming very serious and in grave danger again of becoming too political, so, I'd better lighten up.

An important visitor to the Belfast shipyard was being shown round by one of the company's directors. Clearly impressed by the size and scale of the place the visitor asked, "How many men work here?" "Oh, I'd say less than half of them," The director said. (Ah, sure the old ones are always the best!)

But, with something in excess of 40,000 employees there was probably a lot of truth in the director's reply.

All activities were controlled and supervised by Chargehands, Foremen and Ship Managers. The Chargehands were the NCOs, the Foremen the Warrant Officers and the Managers all seemed to think that they were the personal representatives on earth of the Lord God Almighty!

As symbols of their authority and status, and probably to afford some measure of cranial protection, the Foremen and Managers always wore bowler hats, because of which they were collectively known as "Blocker Men." Everybody else, the Chargehands and the workers, all wore flat caps. I don't ever remember any other form of headgear.

And that brings me to the Cat and Mouse business and the dreaded phrase, "Gimmee yer board."

Thinking back, I cannot really understand the shipyard timekeeping system. Each man was allocated a "board," which was stamped on one edge with a four-figure number - and that is the part I don't understand - with over 40,000, why only four figures? I suppose the numerous time huts were the answer.

Each morning the men went to the time huts before a hooter sounded, called their numbers at a pigeon hole and were given their boards. When the horn sounded, the timekeepers slammed the shutters down and anyone who was late had the stark choice of either going home and losing a day's pay or seeking out his Foreman who would - or often arbitrarily would not - give a note permitting the timekeeper to give the latecomer his board - against a pay deduction, of course.

After my first encounter with a condescending and caustic Foreman, I would simply turn round and go home again on the rare occasions when I was late.

There is a story about a policeman who stopped a shipyard worker one morning on the Queen's Road for some minor traffic bye-law infringement involving his bicycle and the pavement,

"Aw, look, I'm going to be late." The man pleaded.

"Serious, see. Gotta book you, boyo." The policeman insisted. (He must have been Welsh.)

"Please. I been late twice this week. I'll get the sack. You wouldn't want that."

"Mmm . . . Well..." The Welsh policeman must also have been a rookie. He was weakening.

"Look, take my name. You can ask for me at the shipyard. Everybody knows me there."

"All right. What's yer name?"

"Snoozebreak." Said the man. "Everybody knows me. Honest."

"How do you spell that?"

The worker obliged as the policeman laboriously wrote the spelling in his notebook.

"OK. Off you go."

Half-an-hour later, the policeman presented himself at one of the shipyard time huts. "Er. D'u have a Snoozebreak here?"

"A what?" The timekeeper asked and cupped an ear. The policeman consulted his notebook. "Snoozebreak. Do you have a Snoozebreak here?" He repeated.

The timekeeper grinned. "A Snoozebreak? Hell, no, Constable. We don't even have a bloody teabreak."

Cat and Mouse

Actually, the timekeeper was telling the truth - the Company did not allow its employees to have tea breaks - not even the office staff. The result was perhaps predictable. The men simply took unofficial, uncontrolled tea breaks whenever they felt like it. On ships being built or fitted out, it was easy for groups of men to find hiding dens, while the foremen and the managers expended much time and energy trying to root them out.

But if that was a permanent cat and mouse game, the constant running battle between the managers and the apprentices was more like an ongoing Tom and Gerry cartoon.

There was a surprising amount of hot riveting necessary on the ships even during the fitting out period, and, until Frank Mac and I solved the problem using technology, the only sources of heat for the boiling of water were the numerous riveters' coke fires out on the open decks.

It was the accepted practice that the tradesmen provided the necessary tea and sugar and condensed milk, in sticky grease-proofed paper twists, while the apprentices foraged for water using fire-blackened tin cans with twisted wire handles. So the foremen and managers mounted occasional watch on the fresh water taps and occasional watch on the riveters' fires, while the apprentices mounted permanent watch on the foremen and the managers.

Each apprentice would have at least three cans to boil up, and the tin cans were placed on and removed from the rivet fires by means of welding rods with their ends bent into hooks.

"Gimme yer board"

One morning, intent upon balancing five tin cans of scalding hot tea, I missed an urgent warning signal and ran into the path of a marauding manager.

I regret to say it, but he and I shared the same surname, Hunter, although my nickname was either "*Professor*" or "*The Reverend Through-other*" depending upon friend or foe, while the manager, Mr Hunter, had no friends and was universally known as "*The Protestant Pope*."

"Gimme yer board."

I put the cans down and fished about in my many pockets for the board, while the Pope kicked over the cans and squashed them under his feet. Now that was just vindictive!

Parting with my board and possible suspension was bad enough - but I also had to face the wrath of the men whose cans had been ruined. Some men claimed to have had their tea cans for years, although I doubt the validity of such claims. Depends how vigilant the tea boys were, I suppose, and the quality of the tin of which the cans were made.

And I had another problem, which became more worrying as the day wore on. I knew I was in for a week's suspension, that was only to be expected, but it was a Friday, payday, so I needed my board to hand over at the time hut window in exchange for my pay-packet. To make matters worse, I had a date that evening with a very pretty girl, a bank manager's secretary called Barbara, and I was stony broke.

Eventually, I could stand the uncertainty no longer. I sought out my chargehand, Hope Ferguson. Yes, that really was his name. Legend had it that he had two sisters called "Faith" and "Charity" - but I have no means of verifying that.

Hope glared at me as I approached. "What's the matter with your face?" He asked.

"Er. Hope? Have you got my board?"! Began.

"Now, why should I have your board?"

"Well, er." I swallowed nervously. "That manager, the ah ... the Pope, he took it."

"Did he, now? I expect he had a reason. Boiling cans o' water, was it?"

"Er, well, yes," I confessed. "But, you see, it's ... it's Friday."

"So?"

"Er, well, so, I need my board to collect my pay ..."

"Pay. Pay?" Hope's chin jutted towards me. "Do ye think yer worth any bloody pay?"

I was struggling to find an answer to Hope's rhetorical question when he produced my board from his jacket pocket and gave it to me. I took it quickly before he changed his mind.

"Just don't get caught again. Understand?"

Thinking back, that was interesting - and I did understand. Hope had said, "*Don't get caught again*," and not, "*Don't do it again*."

And, because it was a first offence, I escaped the customary suspension without pay.

On the down side - Barbara stood me up! She went off with some fellow from the bank, who didn't spend most of his spare time at evening classes and studying.

Another down side - I spent so long in night classes that I can't count during the day. It's a bit of a bugger, that - I don't know how often I've been short-changed in shops.

Student Nurses

Actually, I wasn't too upset about being stood up by Babs that Friday evening. I mean, I couldn't really blame the lass. It wasn't much fun for her trying to keep company with an ambitious and compulsive bookworm who attended evening classes four times a week and studied most of the remainder of the time.

And so, like many other apprentice/evening class students I soon discovered that Student Nurses made the best girlfriends - provided one didn't expect even the slightest sympathy when afflicted by burns, cuts or abrasions, colds, headaches, or any other human ailment short of life-threatening, that is. But they did understand the demands of studying, exam cramming and long hours. And, with their split shifts on the Wards, Student Nurses were often ready to come out to play when all the other girls were thinking of going home to bed. So, in retrospect, life wasn't all bad for the hard-pressed apprentice/student who knew the score.

One disadvantage of the Student Nurse girlfriend was that many of them were very religious, and off-putting words like "redeemed" and "saved by Grace" featured largely in the vocabulary they used while earnestly trying to convert heathens like me. Then again, don't the ladies always try to change us and make us into something we patently are not? (Oops- that's me in trouble!)

Anyway, shortly after she left me for her bank clerk, I met a Student Nurse and soon forgot all about Babs, until she invited me to her wedding some months later. Fast worker, that lad from the bank - I expect cheap mortgages had something to do with it - I don't think there was any other reason, not in Belfast, and certainly not at that time.

From now on I shall call my Student Nurse simply "SN" on the usual grounds of no names, no pack drill. She was presently to add the initials "SRN" after her name anyway.

Despite being one of the more religious of her sisterhood, SN had been keeping company with a shipyard electrical apprentice and general no-good ratbag called Peter Potter, until, one miserable cold and wet October night, he suddenly walked off in the middle of a heated argument and left her standing, shocked and distressed, on the steps of the Technical College. Knowing that rotter Potter, even in Belfast and even at that time, I had a fair idea about the subject of the argument.

I had been waiting for the rain to ease off and so witnessed the incident. SN was clearly very upset and began to cry. Cursing Potter under my breath, I walked over and offered a clean handkerchief and some kind words, none of them complimentary to Potter, of course. I soon had her smiling through her tears, then, mentioning that St Patrick obviously hadn't managed to banish all the snakes from Ireland after all, I had her laughing. Like most Irishmen, I can talk the hind leg off a horse, and be dangerously persuasive when I put my mind to it.

Then I gallantly offered to escort her the mile or so along the Lisburn Road to the Samaritan Hospital. As we walked we talked, of course, and despite my obvious kind nature SN detected in me another Sinner in need of Salvation. So, rotter Potter apart, it could be said that it was her religion that brought us together - and it was my persistent rejection of said religion that separated us a year or so later, but not before SN had exhausted her missionary zeal trying to persuade me to turn from my many-fold sins and wickedness.

To the envy of my fellow night school students, and the chagrin of Potter, SN met me each night after classes. We would then walk along the Lisburn Road as far as the Botanic Park. Although the park was officially closed at sunset, there were neither gates nor railings as they had been ripped up and removed during 1943 for war production. If it was raining we would shelter under SN's umbrella behind some bushes against the end wall of the old hothouse, where it was always warm, even in winter. I would spend an hour or so with her, until it was time to rush to the Nurses' Home before the formidable main door was closed and locked at 23:00, in accordance with the strict notice which ended with the chilling words "by Order. HOME SISTER."

Occasionally we did not get there in time and I would have to assist SN to climb in through a rear window left unlocked by the residents for just such emergencies. Sometimes there would be three or four other boyfriends helping their locked-out girlfriends to climb in. (I found out years later that the Home Sister knew all about the window, had used it herself when she was a Student. Can't really explain why, but for some reason I like knowing that.)

Better not say any more on that topic - when you're in a hole -stop digging!B

But it was all very innocent really - I mean, *Belfast in 1948* - it really was a hot bed of celibacy in those days.

After seeing SN safely home, I would then catch a late-running tramcar for the thirty-minute journey home, during which time I read through my class notes in preparation for doing any homework before going to bed well after midnight. Long day!

To be continued