

CHAPTER ONE -- IN THE BEGINNING

A respectful, but decisive knock at the door. My Executive Officer, Commander Jim Barlow, stuck his head around the curtain as he had done so often in the past two years. "Boat's crew mustered sir." "Thanks Number One" I replied. In a few minutes after thirty-four years at sea I was about to end my seagoing career with those few matter-of-fact words. Although I was not leaving the Navy, I was leaving the sea, which had been my way of life since the age of sixteen -- thirty-four years ago.

Looking back on it, what led this sixteen year old kid to climb up the gangway of the ss.Ramore Head on the twelfth of October 1949 is still a bit of a mystery to me? I think it was a second-choice solution, because when I was fifteen I had some thoughts of going into the Royal Navy as a midshipman. It was time to reflect.

For some reason or another I must have wanted to go to sea, but I can't recall why. There was no burning desire to go -- nor was there any thought of what else I might do. I wish I could be more definitive, but I don't actually remember the day when I made the decision that I wanted to go to sea more than anything else in the world. In retrospect, I don't think that ever came into it. Even now, I have no idea when, how, and why I became interested in a life at sea. I think my interest in the Royal Navy probably was due to my father's war service, but I don't really know.

It's possible that my lineage may have had something to do with it. My father was one of three brothers who had all gone to sea. Their father, I recently discovered, had also been at sea before them. So perhaps there is some truth to the old expression about the sea being in a person's blood. However, I'm getting ahead of myself.

I was born in London, England, on the fifth of February 1933 -- the younger brother of Geoffrey, who was born on the first day of the year 1928, and older brother of Aileen, who was born on the twenty-eighth of May 1937. Our parents were Edith and William Hunt.

Whether it was due to a lack of inquisitiveness, or some other unknown reason, my knowledge and recollection of my early childhood, before the age of about five or six, is almost nonexistent. What knowledge I do have of that period was gained through anecdotes that my mother or other relatives told me as I was growing up. For some strange reason the only anecdotes that were ever relayed to me showed me as either mischievous, or downright rotten. There was never any hint that I might have been extremely bright, witty, bold and audacious, or anything like that! Of course, on the other hand, no matter how hard it is to believe, it could have been true.

Each story commenced with some phrase like, "You were such a scruffy little kid" -- -- or some other ego-boosting introduction.

I don't think these little glimpses of my activities at a young age gave me a complex. In fact, I think that it gave me some form of status. Just like the time when I got my revenge on the detractors in my family, when I proudly announced to my parents that my schoolteacher had made me "Captain of the Dunces." Now that was an honour and achievement! Obviously my teacher was a person of vision -- someone who had seen the leadership potential of this young genius at an early age.

To avoid being accused of conveniently forgetting some of the less auspicious aspects of my early childhood, and to get them out of the way early in this account of my life, I will recount a couple of my childish, harmless pranks, as relayed to me by my mother. Whether they were true or not will be left for you to decide, based on the evidence.

I was once accused by my mother -- but the case was never proved -- of painting the wooden rollers on her mangle (clothes wringer), and my brother's new bicycle, with a very attractive, royal blue enamel paint. From what I can understand I was found guilty by a kangaroo court (my mother), simply because I was the only person in the garage covered in blue paint. Very circumstantial evidence indeed!

Another time, I allegedly hit my cousin Ralph over the head with a wooden mallet and gave him concussion, after he had been explaining to me the many uses of such a tool. As he had his back to his assailant it was never proved that I was the perpetrator. But whoever assaulted him obviously showed him another use for a mallet!

While I am sure I was totally innocent of those heinous crimes, the unkindest cut of all was when my vengeful cousin Thelma, tied me to a drainpipe with my mother's clothes line. She tied me so tight that my mother couldn't untie the knots. My mother, being ever mindful of the cost involved, left me tied to the drainpipe until my father came home some hours later. I believe she saw it as some form of retribution for the blue paint incident.

I have used the above instances to show how the alleged playful acts on my part, totally obscured the many acts of exemplary behaviour that I am sure I also displayed. I believe that is why, in my mind, any information about me and my family's background when I was very young is almost nonexistent, or at the best, sketchy -- which is one way of saying that I did not have an inquisitive mind until later in life

My father, William Henry Thomas Hunt, had been born in Belfast, Northern Ireland on the fourth of March 1901, the youngest of three

brothers. They had all joined the Merchant Navy as officer cadets, at the age of sixteen -- all of them eventually becoming Master Mariners.

He joined his first ship, the ss.Barrister, on the 25th February 1918. Within a couple of days of sailing, his ship was torpedoed in the Irish Sea, with the loss of 29 lives. My father, who couldn't swim, clung on to some wreckage until he was picked up. While that incident could easily have discouraged a sixteen-year old lad from going to sea, it obviously didn't. He, like many others, just accepted it and got on with the job in another ship.

The information I have about my father's family is very limited. Only in recent years, after my mother died, did I first see my father's birth certificate. It showed his father's name as William Henry, and his occupation as, "Sailor" -- nothing more. Just that one word. Having met some of my father's cousins and other relatives when I was a child, I had deduced that his mother's maiden name was McClean, and she probably came from the Dungannon, Cookstown area of Northern Ireland. This was recently confirmed when I saw her name as Nancy Matilda McClean.

Years ago, when I was about ten or so, I remember my aunt in Belfast telling me that my grandfather was a "Bluenoser." This meant nothing to me, except that he obviously had a blue nose. In subsequent years I was to hear her use that term again, but this time it was qualified by comments about Nova Scotia. For years, that was the only thing I knew about my grandfather -- he had a blue nose and he was somehow connected to some place in Canada called Nova Scotia.

Only in very recent years have I been able to get a slightly clearer picture of where he may have come from. Not who he was -- but where he might have come from. As I subsequently learned, people from Nova Scotia are traditionally called "bluenosers" -- a fact that now confirmed his origin. The Public Archives in Halifax, Nova Scotia, show that there were 72 people with the name of Hunt living in Queen's County between the years of 1864 and 1873, which would probably be within the range of the date of birth of my grandfather. I can only assume that my grandfather was one of those 72 people.

But how did this Nova Scotian get to Northern Ireland at the latter part of the nineteenth century, when the trend was for people from Britain, Ireland and Europe to cross the Atlantic to the New World? Why had he reversed the process?

The shipping company that my father and his brothers had joined as cadets was called Rankin and Gilmore. In the nineteenth century Rankin and Gilmore (then Pollock Gilmore) had their sailing ships built in Nova Scotia, which was famous for its soft woods -- ideal

for sailing ship hulls. It's possible that my grandfather signed on, or stowed away, on one of those new ships as they left Nova Scotia to sail over to Britain to start their life of trading around the world; hence the designation "Sailor" as my father's birth certificate showed for the occupation of his father. I understand that he died when my father was about five, so my father's recollections of him would have been very limited too. Perhaps I will learn more one day.

My grandparents, on both my father and mother's side of the family had died many years before I was born. Therefore, it's understandable why a young child wouldn't ask questions about people he didn't know, or were seldom mentioned? Unfortunately, the people who could have answered my questions are all dead now.

It was only at the beginning of the Second World War that I first learned that my father had two brothers. The oldest, David, was, many years later, instrumental in finding me a place as cadet in a shipping company when I first went to sea. He continued to take a great interest in my career for the rest of his life. He had also played a large part in getting my father to sea.

In those days the parents of a cadet had to pay the shipping company a sum of money for the "privilege" of the company training their son. This money was then repaid to the cadet over the four-year period of the apprenticeship. Any interest in the account was paid back at the end of the apprenticeship. I only mention this because my father's parents were dead before he went to sea. It therefore fell upon the oldest brother, David, to find the money to pay for his two younger brothers to go to sea.

Uncle David lived in Belfast, Northern Ireland, with his wife Peggy and son Olaf. The other brother, Joe, lived in Mumbles, South Wales. From what I can gather, he was the wild one of the three. I have a document from a shipping company where he was once employed, stating that he had been fired because he, "disagreed with the Master." Having only met him once, this does not surprise me.

Another story I remember hearing -- and I don't know the full story, was that he was Master of some ship during the war that had been torpedoed. He was injured, and spent many months recuperating in a hospital in the United States. Somehow or other his wife thought he had been killed, because he hadn't contacted her. To say that she was somewhat surprised when he arrived home one day is a bit of an understatement. I only met him once, when he breezed in to our house in Belfast just after the war. He arrived totally unannounced -- having not seen my parents for about fifteen years. He was different.

My mother's family was from London. Later, when my mother was in her twenties, there was a strong association with Liverpool, which

was to continue into my generation and to our children's as well. My mother's parents, Charles and Ellen Lunn, owned and operated a Newsagent and Tobacconist's shop on Lower Road, near the Surrey Commercial Docks in the heart of London's dockland. That area is now home to many expensive condominiums (apartments). A few years ago operating a small shop near the docks would be seen as a risky, if not a foolhardy business to be in. But in those days, at the turn of the century, Britain was made up of a "nation of shopkeepers."

My grandfather was known as a Master Tobacconist, which I believe was a highly coveted title, as it was recognized as a very honourable trade. He was also a Councillor for the Borough of Bermondsey, which was a suburb of London. The shop itself was ideally located for the large number of men either employed on the docks, or on the many ships that plied the oceans of the world from those docks. Ironically, that same area today is very fashionable, and has changed its name from Surrey Docks to Surrey Quays, obviously to give it an air of sophistication. It is now the site of some of London's most expensive homes and apartments.

As was the case on my father's side, my mother's parents had died before I was born, therefore everything I know about them is from stories that I have heard from my mother, aunts, uncles and cousins. However, because I saw a lot more of my mother and her relatives than my father and his relatives -- and the fact that they talked about their family a lot more than my father's family did, I know a little more about them. Some of the stories I heard about them only became known after the death of my mother.

Apparently my grandfather was a great gambler. From what I understand he was either rich or poor, depending on the racing form of the horses he backed. When he was not doing so well, the family lived above the shop in Lower Road, but when he was in the money the family would live in the Old Manor House, which from its name suggests a certain affluence. The only link I have found with the Manor House is that today there is a public house (bar) of that name in the area. There is also a painting of the Manor, painted in 1826. While that house was probably only a century or two old, its predecessor had been, almost certainly, the home of the various Lords of that Manor for many centuries. I doubt if I will ever find out just why the family lived in this house periodically.

If my childish misdemeanours (and another subsequent brush with the law which I shall discuss later) give the impression of a criminal past, I have recently discovered that I come by it fairly. My grandfather, in addition to being a betting man was also involved in passing betting slips, which meant that he was an illegal agent for a bookmaker. Needless to say he was caught, prosecuted and went to Wormwood Scrubs Jail for three months. In those days, the normal punishment for most crimes was incarceration for a period of time.

Today, he would have been fined. If I could have had a choice of some criminal connection in the family I would have preferred to say that I had a highwayman as one of my ancestors, rather than a bookie's agent!

My mother, Edith Lilian Lunn, and her twin sister Florence Daisy, were born in London on the sixteenth of June 1901. The family was living in the Old Manor House at the time, so the horses must have been running well! They were the second youngest of six other children -- Charles, Len, Bert (who emigrated to the United States at age 16), Ivy, and her twin who died at birth, and another sister named Marjorie.

As I understand it, and as was the custom at the time, the boys in the Lunn family went to work outside the family business, whereas the girls worked behind the counter. It is therefore not surprising that the three girls -- Ivy, Florence (Flo) and Edith, met and married three Merchant Navy officers -- Archie, David and William respectively.

Archie was an Engineer with the Cunard Line, and was quite a bit older than the others. Ivy was ten years older than Flo and Edith. David was a young Radio Officer, who was with the Marconi company, which provided shipping companies with Radio Officers. The third, William, known as Billy, who was to become my father, was a Second Officer with a shipping company called Rankin and Gilmore.

My father and mother were married on the thirteenth of June 1925. My mother was three days short of her twenty-fourth birthday, and my father was twenty-four. Shortly thereafter they bought a house on Lonsdale Avenue in East Ham, London. It was from that house that my mother's twin sister was married to David Crombie. It was also the house in which my brother and my cousin Thelma were born.

As my father worked for a Liverpool-based shipping company, my mother and father must have decided that as the ships spent most of their time in that port when they were in the UK, it would make more sense to live there. So, after obtaining his Master's Certificate in the late 1920's they sold the house in East Ham and bought a house in Liverpool.

So why was I born in London? In the early thirties, Britain and the rest of the industrialized world were in the throes of the worst depression in history. Large and small businesses went bankrupt, throwing millions of people out of work. Britain was in chaos. Suicides were a common occurrence. Many people were starving. It obviously affected my father's shipping company, because if there was no money to buy and sell goods, there was no requirement to transport them.

Many years later I remember my father using the expression,

"there was many a Master's ticket in the focsle." What this meant was that there were many officers with Master's Certificates who were now serving as deckhands, because it was the only job they could get, as so many ships had been laid-up. Those that had these jobs unfortunately replaced the regular sailors. It was a bad period.

Like many other people in the shipping industry my father was laid off during the "great depression." He had his Master's Certificate, but as I explained, that didn't guarantee a job. After losing his job my father decided to start a one-man business as a supplier of personal articles to men who were still lucky enough to have a job at sea. He must have decided to do this from a London base. So my mother, father and brother moved to London, to live with my mother's twin sister Flo and her husband David, at Grove Park, where my cousin Thelma still lives.

My father obviously needed a car to carry out his business, so he took a risk and bought one. Until recently I didn't know why my father had a car, but I remember being told that he had one -- mainly because of another anecdote from my mother. Apparently, when riding in the back seat of the car, I used to get great delight as a young kid in tipping my father's hat over his eyes while he was driving. I was just testing his ability in blind pilotage! Another one of these stories that may, or may not, have been true.

Unfortunately this business venture went the way of so many others in those days -- so once again my father found himself without a job. My mother and father owned the house in Liverpool, but with no job, there was little point in returning there. If there were any jobs, they would probably have been in or near the capital, and not the provinces. Therefore they stayed in London and my father went looking for work there.

Luckily for my father, my aunt's next-door neighbour, Mr. Wood (who, when I was a kid, I would address as "Big Woody," as was my polite style to my seniors), was the head porter at The London Hospital. He found a job there as a porter for my father, which although it was not in a position that my father had spent so many years training for -- it was a job that thousands would have been glad to have had. I was born while my parents were living at Grove Park.

Shortly after my father started working again, we moved in with my mother's spinster aunt (Billy) and her bachelor brother (Fred) at 34 Senlac Road. It was just a short walk from where my parents had been staying at Coopers Lane, Grove Park. They did not sell their house in Liverpool until about 1952 -- nor did they ever live in it again. Absentee landlords for about twenty years!

As I said earlier, there is very little that I can remember about my early childhood up to the beginning of World War II. One of my earliest recollections of a specific event was when I was about

five years of age. This was when my father was employed at the London Hospital. The reason that it stands out in my memory so well was that I had developed a protruding navel and that I had to see a specialist. Isn't it amazing to think that the one big event in my life that I can remember from that period is something as exciting as a protruding belly button?

It was arranged that I would go up to town (London) with my father to the hospital where he worked. That was my first recollection of going "up town." The outcome of my visit was that I had to wear a type of corset with a protruding pad on it which help push my navel back where it belonged. I had now learnt my first medical term -- umbilical hernia!

I cannot recall specific events involving my mother during that period, but I have a photograph of my mother's twin sister, Auntie Flo, with her daughter Thelma -- the same cousin who had tied me to the drainpipe, walking along the front at Cliftonville with me in tow. I believe that it must have been when my mother was in hospital giving birth to my sister in 1937. I cannot actually recall the occasion, but there is something in my mind that says I do. I think it has more to do with the auto-suggestive nature of the photograph than remembering the event.

While I have some difficulty believing all the anecdotes that were told about me, I do actually remember one event, which I readily admit to. School was not a part of my life that I particularly enjoyed at the time. Therefore, on the way to school I used to roll the halfpenny that I had been given for my milk, down the drain in the gutter. This did not make me popular with my mother, and even less so with my brother, who was responsible for getting me back and forth to school. I believed that if I "lost" my milk money on the way to school, then my mother would let me stay home that day. For some reason it did not seem to work -- but I certainly found out how easy it was to get my brother upset!

Another thing that I do remember during those early years was being taken to my Uncle Len and Auntie May's house on sunny Sunday afternoons. They had a beautiful garden with a badminton court, where the various members of the Lunn family, their offspring and friends would enjoy themselves on those lovely days. I stress the word "sunny" because that is how I remember them. I'm sure not every one was a sunny day, but in my mind they always were.

The "Lunn gatherings" became quite an event in my life. The practice was shifted to Liverpool during and after the war, where my aunt (Ivy) enjoyed playing hostess to any and all of the Lunn family descendants, their families and their many friends. Those gatherings, which lasted for many years, became famous throughout the family until her death in the mid-1960s.

I believe that we have now lost that feeling of the total family, which like many other things at the time I assumed just "happened." Although attempts have been made occasionally to have similar gatherings, I feel that the family members are now too widely dispersed and too busy with their own lives. That is not a criticism of anyone -- it is just an unfortunate sign of the times. We have lost something, never to be regained.