

Response to the USA National Service Questionnaire

Timing: I was called up in October 1947. At that time conscripts had to serve for two years, and I was discharged (given my freedom) in October 1949

Immediate effects: Of course it disrupted my life. How could it not? I had started work in 1945 and was at an early stage in what I hoped would be a successful career, and military service took me away from that life. It also meant leaving home and family and going off into unknown territory. But that doesn't mean that I felt hard-done by. In some way I welcomed it as an adventure, a new experience. Since it was a universal requirement (for men) one just got on with it, and my recent experience of living through WW2 had made me well aware of the need for armed forces to defend the country.

Where and what training/skills: At my attendance at the initial call-up centre I had managed to get assigned to the Royal Navy; you had to make a positive option to get in the RN, the standard default being the Army, and had to take an intelligence test. Actual service began maybe two months later, with initial training for 6 or so weeks somewhere in Wiltshire. This was basic stuff- kitting up with uniform, getting used to being part of a disciplined group, parade ground marching and so on, physical training/activity, and final allotment to a specific trade/specialist function. I joined the Communications group and became a Signaller (which is what I'd hoped to achieve; much more interesting than being an 'aircraft handler' which they first wanted me to become). Specialist skills training was at an establishment near Chatham: this took maybe 4 or 5 months. As a Signaller I had to acquire a range of skills relating to visual signalling/messaging – Morse code, use of lamps, flags, even semaphore, as well as office skills such as typing (managed 30 words per minute!), operating a Fax machine and how to run the office. There were some useful transferable skills among that lot.

Assignments: in the Army, and I suppose the RAF, one was sent to a place where one might stay for your whole period of service- eg Cyprus, Hong Kong, Manchester. That could happen in the Navy but mostly one ended up on a sea-going ship (as opposed to a land establishment), and if you were lucky, travelled to interesting places. On completion of training my group was sent to HMS Mercury, the shore establishment and HQ for the Communications branch (Mercury was of course the messenger for the senior Greek gods), and soon after that assigned to HMS Theseus (Greek gods abounded in the RN). This was an aircraft carrier which had just been refitted and most of the crew were national servicemen like me, with no experience of service-life or of being at sea. We spent some time – months I recall - sailing up and down the Channel while the two squadrons of aircraft we carried practised flying off and coming back on board, several times a day -the pilots were mostly new too.

After all that practice we formed up with other ships to become of the 2nd Aircraft Carrier Squadron - consisting of two carriers and four destroyers. Spent a lot of time at sea doing manoeuvres round the British Isles; then off to the Mediterranean, with stays at Gibraltar and Malta; then back to Portsmouth, then off to South Africa, with a stop at Sierra Leone,

the main purpose being 'showing the flag', showing off our strength I suppose. And there were spells of joint manoeuvres with other NATO countries. We did spend a week in the summer of 1948, at anchor in Bournemouth Bay, again 'showing the flag'; local boatmen no doubt profited from running trips round the warships.

My experience was entirely peaceful; no wars on during my service. No new hobbies/interests acquired save for playing bridge—the communications messdeck had ideas above its station. The living accommodation (the Communications messdeck) consisted of an open space for (maybe 30 plus in all) signalmen and wireless telegraphists. No beds or bunks in those days; we slept in hammocks which swung from the ceiling and were rolled up and stacked during the day. Long trestle tables and benches to sit on and eat at – food was collected (there was a rota for that task) from the galley and we ate where we sat and where we slept. Very different from home life! Food on the whole was good, if a bit plain. We did share the accommodation with a complement of rats, and we never did eliminate the cockroaches, but that's life at sea for you.

What did I learn, enjoy, etc: A range of specific naval skills, and transferable ones, as noted above. And general life skills like the value of/need for personal and joint discipline to ensure things get done properly and organisations can achieve their objectives. How to get on with people from very different backgrounds, levels of learning and so on. How to look after yourself. Specific personal skills like washing one's clothes, darning socks. How to cope with the constant pitching or rolling of the ship (18 months on a warship has helped me to cope with cruise ships in later life!). I enjoyed much of my time. Class divisions occasionally surfaced, when the divide between the 'officers' and the 'men' became apparent; it irked me, but there wasn't scope for much off-duty contact between the two classes. I certainly enjoyed, and benefited from, the world travel, to get some idea of how different people and places could be. I'm not sure it changed me as a person, but it did expand my vision of the world, and gave me more confidence in coping with it. I have many good memories of people and places and events. But I made no life-long friends: we were young, and went our own ways when our service time ended.

Incidents, events of interest: I recall marching with hundreds of others from our fleet, through Capetown to celebrate the birth of the current Prince of Wales. He was born while we were there (for two weeks) and the authorities decided we should put on a show. Sailors don't know how to march, or carry a rifle, so it turned out a bit shambolic; but we got a very good reception from the local population. I saw (from a distance) Ascension Island; I sat in a café at the top of Table Mountain; I 'discovered' Eccles cakes in the Naafi at Portsmouth (never met them up to that time). I never learnt to swim: I had hoped the Navy would make me learn but at the time I was in training, for the first few months of service, there was a national polio epidemic and all swimming baths (with other places of public gathering) were closed. Anyway, sailors don't need to swim.

Bring National Service back? The world has changed a lot since I did my stint of service. The idea of all young people having to do something 'for their country' appeals to me greatly. But I don't like the idea of it being based on training for warlike conflict – you couldn't anyway replicate the sort of experiences/learning that we all had in the 40s and 50s

– we don't have army bases round the world and we no longer rule the waves! But I suggest it would help the process of leaving adolescence and becoming truly adult, if people had to get out of their familiar environment, their 'safe places', and learn how to get on with other people from many different backgrounds, how to work together for common aims, see the value of co-operation as against conflict, and so on. No rifles, armaments in sight, but certainly some social history would come in handy. It seems to me reasonable that young people should all be expected to do something for their nation; there are big questions as to what it might consist of, but I won't wax on that here.

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