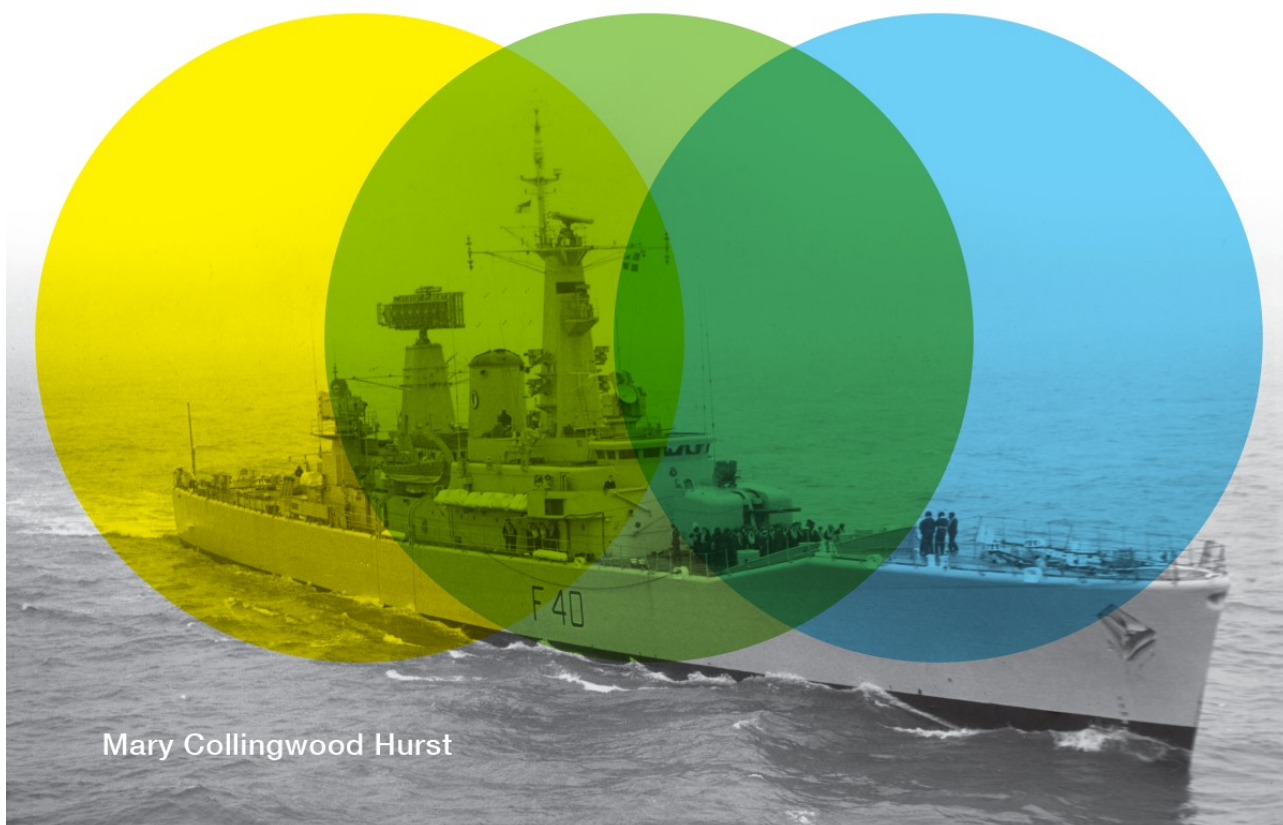


Green Smarties

Tales of a Navy Wife



Mary Collingwood Hurst

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by
Mary Collingwood Hurst

This book is dedicated to all Navy and Service wives; in fact all wives wooed by a smart uniform, wining and dining, exciting stories and presents.

Right up to the day of reality when they suddenly find themselves standing in an empty house surrounded by nothing but packing cases, while their husband disappears on a tour of duty for an indeterminate period.

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It is said in the Navy that when sailors go away on a long deployment, they ask their wives to collect all the green Smarties from the tubes of sweets during their absence.

When the sailor returns, his wife scatters the green Smarties across grass and sends the children out to look for the well camouflaged goodies.

Meanwhile the sailor and his wife have 'catch up' time before the children can interrupt them!

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Mary Collingwood Hurst asserts her moral right to be identified as the author of this book.

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- Mary Collingwood Hurst, 2014

Prologue

After 20 years of involvement with the Navy, which ended in the late 1980s, I can identify an aircraft carrier or a submarine; but anything in between is a blur of grey metal with a pointy end and a blunt end. Except for RFA TIDESURGE which, without any qualifications, I was allowed to steer across the South China Sea for five hours in a moment of madness. That is a ship whose shape and size I will always be able to remember. Sadly she no longer exists and has long been sent to a ships' graveyard to be reduced to razor blades.

But I have immense pride that for a while I was on the periphery of the Senior Service and shared life with someone involved in the defence of our country, wardroom rugby, RPCs (Request Pleasure of the Company). In other words alcoholic orgies. With him I endured brushes with the KGB, Special Branch, MI5 & MI6 (not all at once of course).

There were sudden surprises such as my husband being sent to the Antarctic for eight months when baby number two was imminent or finding myself in Singapore unofficially and living in a tiny flat in a Chinese village and working in the Navy Base. We were there for the final year of history before the British Forces withdrew forever on the 31 October 1971.

Life was never dull and spanned many adventures juggling three children and taking care of the home-made wine while he was away. Or jumping on a plane with a child under each arm to join him on an unaccompanied post in Hong Kong for months.

Without the sisterhood of Navy wives, some of whose stories are included in this book, life would have been much more arduous.

There should be medals awarded to all Service wives. Your Majesty please make note.

Part 1 – Once Upon a Time

Chapter 01 – Red Hat, Red Face

The strident sound of an emergency siren ripped the air apart on a warm summer's night in July 1969.

Following hard behind the ambulance, my father gripped the steering wheel of the elderly car that he'd had for so long it was almost vintage. His face was ashen, his foot pressed hard down on the accelerator in an attempt to keep up.

'The doctor says your mother will need an emergency operation – he thinks the intense pain she is suffering is a burst appendix.'

I sat anxiously alongside him in the passenger seat.

'She'll be in safe hands.' I replied trying to sound calm.

I worked at Poole Hospital where my mother was being taken, and knew the surgical team well.

As soon as my mother was admitted to a ward, the surgical registrar came to talk us through the procedure.

'I will be operating on her myself.' he said, and threw me a reassuring smile.

For a moment my heart stopped. 'Widow Twanky operating on my mother?' I thought with horror.

The registrar was a very competent doctor and surgeon but it was difficult for me to shake off the memories I had of him as a friend, when I had seen him in a social environment and he had exhibited a flair for madness and drama.

In the hospital pantomime seven months earlier, he had played an alarmingly convincing 'dame.' As co-members of the pantomime committee we shared the embarrassment when a local amateur orchestra who had been invited to play the overture prior to the performance, attempted to take over the whole show amidst squeaky violins and out of tune wind instruments.

The 'overture' painfully extended to a nail biting forty minutes, causing tension for the performers waiting on stage for the beginning of Scene 1. The audience in the auditorium of the Poole Arts Theatre showed their restlessness with coughs, shuffling and loud audible whisperings of 'if they don't hurry up I

am going to have to leave for my last bus.'

Only a few weeks previously I had spent a day at Lulworth Cove with three colleagues including the registrar and his girl friend and another young doctor I was going out with at the time. On that occasion 'Widow Twanky' was equipped with wetsuit and snorkelling gear and posed for a photo with his flipper slapped firmly across my throat as I lay helpless like a beached whale on the rocks. The sun glinted on his goggles, and he held his harpoon as if poised for the kill.

'Once a surgeon always a surgeon' the other doctor had remarked 'can't resist the opportunity to cut anything open.'

Still vivid in my mind too was the time 'Widow Twanky' held a party at his cottage near the nuclear power station at Winfrith (where he grew magnificent and no doubt highly radioactive mint in the garden). Most of the guests were hospital staff. The introductory game - devised as an ice-breaker - involved two 'borrowed' stretchers from the hospital, two drip stands and two empty bags which had previously contained saline fluid and were now filled with 'scrumpy' - the strong, lethal rough cider of Dorset.

All the guests were then split into two lines. When a whistle was blown, the person at the front of each team ran forward, lay down on a stretcher and had to suck as much cider as possible through the drip line until the whistle was blown again, and the next person took their place.

Whichever team finished their bag of cider first, was the winner. But the combination of sucking air and cider through a tube meant that by the end of the game no-one knew or cared who had won and did not remember too much about the rest of the evening either.

Now, in the cold light of day and the sterilized atmosphere of the hospital, I had to adjust to the fact that Widow Twanky, who filled saline drips with cider as a pastime, was about to operate on my mother in a life or death situation.

After having settled my mother down on the ward, we drove away from the hospital. The air was hot and humid and we were silent, recovering from the shock events of the previous few hours.

My father broke the silence. 'I have to accompany the Mayor and his party tomorrow when they pay a civic visit to HMS SIRIUS - the Royal Navy frigate that came into the bay this afternoon. Your mother was due to come with me - can you take her place?'

As Mayor's Secretary, my father had many duties which ranged from writing speeches to making arrangements for official visits. I was more than happy to help him out on this occasion.

'Of course I will' I replied reassuringly. After all what hot-blooded woman would say no to spending an evening surrounded by men in uniform on board one of her Majesty's ships?

And so it was on the following evening my father and I joined the official civic reception committee standing at the end of Bournemouth Pier, as we waited for the ship's launch to collect us. Below, slapping against the struts of the jetty, the blue-green sea rose and fell with each rising swell of the waves.

HMS SIRIUS lay at anchor offshore, its sleek grey metal shape glowing in the setting sun which by then was slipping gently over the western horizon.

My mother's emergency operation had gone well and she was expected to make a full recovery so my father felt less divided about his call of duty, and I felt less guilty about taking her place and enjoying a party.

The launch arrived and lurched erratically as the Mayor attempted to board. He was momentarily thrown off balance by the official gold chain and heavy badge of office which hung around his neck. The rest of us followed unsteadily behind trying to find sea legs that did not exist.

Stepping aboard the launch I mistimed my footing and fell into the willing hands of a sailor who retrieved me before I disappeared over the other side.

My clothing was impractical for boarding a ship – a red mini dress, two and a half inch high heels, and what I considered to be a fashionable red 'baker boy' chapeau bought in Paris the previous year. This hat was to create a stir amongst the all- male crew for reasons unknown to me at the time.

In the 1960s women were not part of the Royal Navy unless they were shore based Wrens, so any female allowed on board one of Her Majesty's Ships was purely for decoration and a bit of a novelty.

As I attempted to grip the sheer steel ladder that led up the side of the frigate my only thought was that of survival and self preservation. I clung, white knuckled to the metal rungs. The sea, which seemed to have become increasingly choppy out in the bay beyond the protection of the pier, threw the launch around violently with each wave. Any idea of modesty disappeared with a desperate desire to stay alive.

Thoughts flew back to my mother who had visited a submarine the previous year. As she had been heaved aboard unceremoniously and stood shakily on the deck of that sleek minimalist vessel there had been nothing to hold onto – no rail - nothing – except the Captain. She made a beeline for the unfortunate man as he waited to welcome the official party. He was taken aback by this strange woman who flung her arms around his neck and refused to let go.

Eventually she had to be prised off him and escorted below before they both ended up in the sea. Somehow he had retained his dignity despite their tap dance with death as both grappled to stay upright on the slippery deck.

However, a frigate was decidedly more stable than a submarine, and once aboard, I was given the choice of a 'horse's neck', which turned out to be navy language for brandy and ginger ale, or a 'g and t' which is gin and tonic in any language.

The weather being fair meant that the cocktail party took place on the deck under an awning. Over the course of the evening, I was occasionally approached by different officers who would smile and remark 'I like your hat.'

This seemed really polite to begin with, but by the time the Commander had sidled up and made the same comment with a knowing grin, I began to feel there must be something people were not telling me. 'Well I like yours too' I said guardedly, indicating all the gold braid on the rim of his cap.

The official reception lasted two hours. I was chatting to a young lieutenant who introduced himself as Chris. Towards the end another officer suddenly arrived from nowhere and burst in on the conversation. He had dark hair, was not very tall, with piercing blue eyes and a wicked smile.

'Who is this rude man?' I thought somewhat annoyed at the intrusion. Little did I know then, that the 'rude man' concerned would be my husband a few months later.

'Don't forget the rules' he said forcefully to the other officer.

'Rules?' I enquired.

'At an official 'do' you're supposed to mingle with ALL the guests and not monopolise eligible birds until the last half hour' explained the 'rude' officer. 'Then it's every man for himself and fair game – so here I am.'

I did not warm to the implication that I was fair game and began to feel like a prize pheasant.

Then to make matters worse, he added with the same infuriating smile that his fellow officers had displayed previously 'Like your hat.'

'Look' I said impatiently, my courage fuelled by a fifth horse's neck. 'What is all this fascination with my hat?'

The two officers exchanged knowing glances. 'Ah' said the rude officer 'she hasn't heard the saying then.'

'What saying?' I asked getting more annoyed.

'Red hat, no knickers' he responded without the slightest bit of diplomacy. They both smirked.

The colour rushed to my face, and I longed for an opportunity to take the offending article off my head and hide it somewhere. The height of Parisian fashion it may be, but this hat was obviously not the thing to wear on board one of Her Majesty's Ships.

I was just thinking about how quickly I might get back on shore when the rude officer asked 'Join us for a bacon and egg supper?'

'Isn't everyone leaving?' I said.

'Not all of them' he replied 'we've invited the younger ones to stay on board for a bit of a party, and there's also a female journalist from some newspaper down from London who's joining us. We could take you on a tour of the ship and show you the golden rivet.'

Both officers smiled annoyingly at each other again.

I had heard rumours of the golden rivet before, and although never found out exactly what it was, had a very good idea what it entailed.

'You haven't introduced us' the rude officer said accusingly to his friend Chris.

'Sorry' Chris said turning to me 'This is Peter our flight commander – drives the clockwork budgerigar.' Then seeing my vacant expression he added 'Helicopter.'

My father beckoned to me. The rest of the guests were leaving and heading toward the ship's launch for the return journey.

I explained hastily that I would be staying on board.

'Well they're all officers and gentlemen and will look after you.' he said misguidedly. His judgement had obviously been affected by the drink and a sheltered upbringing.

However, I still had vivid memories of a similar party on board a ship a few years before. An impromptu party such as the one I was about to embark on was commonly known as a 'ClutchEx.' I later discovered this was naval shorthand for 'clutching exercise.' It stood for dim lighting, close dancing, heavy breathing and a struggle to keep clothing in place.

On that previous occasion, I had been invited by an engineer officer from a training ship which had visited the bay. He had suggested I bring some of my friends back the following day. It was the early sixties, and innocence was still

around. So most of us were like lambs to the slaughter – all except Lynda that is. She and I had been friends since school. She was very tall, had been to art school and was now training as an actress and was a force to be reckoned with. Having trodden the boards on stage a few times already, treading the boards of a naval vessel to her was a piece of cake.

Most of us though were from the Royal Victoria Hospital where I had been working at the time, and feeling responsible for their well being, I would occasionally count my friends like a mother duck continually checks her number of chicks. It was then that I realised Lynda was missing.

‘Do you think she’s OK’ I asked my escort anxiously.

‘She’s fine’ he said breathing down my neck as the Beatles song ‘Love Love Me Do’ blared out at full volume ‘After all, she’s with the captain.’

Some considerable time later, Lynda and the captain returned to the wardroom. Lynda looked cool and relaxed, but the captain was flushed and dishevelled – his eyes darted about anxiously as though he had been traumatised.

‘You OK?’ I asked her.

‘Don’t worry about me,’ she replied in a hoarse whisper ‘I’m fine – he’s a bit shaken up though. Took me to his cabin but I managed to stay out of his clutches by diverting his attention.’

‘How?’ I asked.

‘Easy’ she said ‘every time I was getting in a tight spot, I just reached towards a button or handle and said and what does this one do? He would then panic and shout don’t touch that.’ Then she paused before adding ‘He was particularly upset about the red ones.’

‘Maybe they were nuclear missiles’ I suggested helpfully.

But now, a few years later, on board HMS SIRIUS I had a rough idea what to expect.

The few of us who had been invited to stay on board for eggs and bacon and a bit of dancing were led down to the Wardroom.

Despite his initial rudeness and abrupt manner, I grew to like Peter during the course of the evening. He was fun and intelligent, and we laughed a lot.

At midnight, those of us who had remained behind made our unsteady way back down the sheer metal ladder at the side of the ship and into the launch. The sea had roughened considerably, and there was a gasp as the boat

which had my feet in it, moved away from the ship to which I still clung with my hands. 'Not a good idea.' said Peter hauling me in. 'Could get trapped between ship and boat – then squelch.'

The journalist, who had somehow managed to leave her footprints on the wardroom ceiling during the course of the evening, was dispatched back to her London newspaper somewhat worse for wear and in disgrace.

Four manic days followed while the ship was in the bay, and Peter and I spent most of that time together.

He was due to disembark on the last afternoon before the ship sailed and he had to fly the helicopter to the shore station HMS OSPREY at Portland.

'I'm starting my new shore posting on the Staff of Flag Officer Sea Training at OSPREY' he said. 'We can keep in touch easily – Portland's only about thirty miles away.'

He suggested I went to the top floor of the hospital and look out to sea at 2.00 p.m. on that final afternoon. 'Should be able to see me flying past.' he said.

'Will you be flying over the hospital?' I asked.

'Heavens no.' he replied 'we're not allowed to fly close to hospitals – too dangerous if our engines fail. It's a court martial offence. You'll just have to squint out to sea as best you can.'

So at 2.00 p.m. on the appointed day, I made my way up to the Maternity ward which was the highest point I could reach. Poole hospital has commanding views of the sea, but try as I may I could not make out any helicopter in the distance – just a few sea gulls.

Disappointed, I returned to the first floor, when suddenly there was the most terrifying noise from above.

I rushed into the courtyard and looked up. A Royal Navy Wasp helicopter was circling low above me – skimming the top of the hospital or so it seemed. Peter was clearly visible leaning out of the cockpit and waving. I waved back enthusiastically.

And that was the start of a brisk and stormy courtship that ended in marriage some months later.

After all, how could I refuse someone who had risked a court martial on my account?

Chapter 02 – Engaging The Enemy

For the months following our first meeting on board HMS SIRIUS, Peter was a regular visitor – either to the flat I shared in Westbourne with two other colleagues from Poole hospital, or at my parents' home on the north side of Bournemouth.

I became very familiar with the train journey between Poole and Weymouth

At the end of my working day, I would often rush straight from the hospital to the station, and was met at the other end of the journey by Peter, who then took me the rest of the way by car to his quarters in HMS OSPREY on Portland.

It was against the rules for officers to entertain females in their cabins, but we soon worked out a slick routine. The mention of rules to Peter was always a challenge to break them.

He would sign me in at the gate to the base, and then take me to the entrance of the block where his quarters were situated. Checking the coast was clear, he would then signal to me and I would run down the corridor to his room. As soon as I got through the door, I would drop to my knees on the floor and crawl Red Indian style until Peter had drawn the curtains.

His room was overlooked by the Commander's office and a tennis court, so we took no chances. Somehow this clandestine behaviour added spice to the relationship and drew us closer together in a bond of conspiracy.

One romantic afternoon spent in his cabin while a thick sea mist enveloped Weymouth Bay, we curled up together and listened to Tchaikovsky's Scheherazade while the mournful sound of the fog horn echoed eerily off Portland Bill. I realised that my feelings for Peter were deepening.

The toilets were next to his room at OSPREY which was convenient for me, but of course they were male only. So if I needed to use them, he would go in and check first and usher me in. Many a time I had to draw my feet up whilst in a cubicle to avoid detection as men wandered in and out doing what men have to do. I would then judge by the sound effects of whistling and trickling water whether it was safe to venture out.

My knowledge of the layout of this floor came in handy a few weeks later when attending a formal dinner dance at the wardroom. At the end of the meal there was the usual dash for the 'ladies' by the guests – only to find there was

just the one cloakroom and a vast queue and I was at the end. So I led an intrepid bunch of desperate women through the labyrinth of corridors, down the stairs and into the forbidden territory of the men's toilets next to the cabins. There were a few surprised officers, but we were all past caring.

That particular evening, Peter had booked us into the luxurious Pennsylvania Castle hotel positioned up the steep hill above HMS OSPREY. The grey Portland stone turrets made it look like a real castle, and it was set in lovely grounds with sea views.

The next morning, heads throbbing with hangovers, we tried taking a bath together with disastrous consequences – we became stuck. It had seemed like a romantic idea at the time, but I gazed out of the small window in despair as Peter tried to work out a way to get us free. I was imagining the embarrassment of being found by the chambermaid when she came to change the bedding, when Peter hit on a bright idea. Being mechanically minded, he managed to adjust the taps in such a way that gave a tiny amount of movement, and with much wriggling we staggered out dripping wet, cold and exhausted.

Peter's job on the staff of Flag Officer Sea Training meant that he was regularly invited on board the visiting ships for their cocktail parties. I would hurry down to Portland at the end of my working day at the hospital to accompany him, and after the party, we would usually join some of the crowd from whichever ship we had been on, to have a meal at the Sea Cow. This was a quaint old restaurant on the side of Weymouth Quay.

From the first floor bay window the view across the harbour was very romantic. The lights shining out of the small terraced houses which lined the quayside reflected magically in the water. Boat masts rose and fell gently with the movement of passing vessels – the sound of their stays slapping against the poles. Opposite the Sea Cow, the row of terraced cottages – each with walls painted a different colour – always inspired my imagination. I dreamed that one day we might perhaps live in such a place near the water in one of the ancient cottages where the spirits of old seafarers from the past still roamed through corridors and rooms.

There was something in the atmosphere of Weymouth that took me back in time. The seagulls' hollow calls echoed off the cobbled streets and dark cramped dwellings and I could almost hear the sounds of the ghostly crew from sailing ships of years gone by.

It brought back memories of my grandfather who had run away to sea at the age of fifteen and worked on tea clippers, the great three-masted ships of the turn of the century. He had many a tale to tell – of mutinies, of how he fell out of the rigging, of how he was shipwrecked and swam round and round an

island afraid to set foot on shore because of all the seabirds nesting there. Sailors were very superstitious about seabirds being really the souls of departed shipmates.

He also survived punishment after knocking out one particularly brutal captain who was bullying a younger crew member. He always made it known he never had much time for the modern navy though. Only those who had gone to sea under sail were proper sailors in his eyes. He had led a chequered existence and was probably the only person who had been both a Cape Horner and an Old Contemptible. Certainly his stories had awoken in me the excitement of a life at sea.

Peter's work at OSPREY seemed to bring with it a certain amount of unpopularity. He was in effect an examiner as far as I could make out. All the ships that came through Portland for sea trials had to be passed by the team under the Admiral known as FOST (Flag Officer Sea Training). Each individual department was examined by someone who specialised in a particular field. Peter was responsible for ensuring that the ships' helicopter pilots and flight crews were up to scratch, and as I soon found out, he 'took no prisoners.'

He was not tall and had suffered the jibes for this all his life. At mess dinners when he had to give a speech, there would be chants of 'stand up' when he was already standing – but he took it in good humour. One RAF officer had nicknamed him 'Trackless' – 'Because your legs are so short and your bottom so close to the ground, you rub out your footprints as you walk along old chap.'

Perhaps it was this treatment that made him more ferocious as an examiner.

His immediate boss Martin, a commander with white hair, was by comparison very tall. Three other members of the staff team however, were vertically challenged like Peter. They became collectively known as 'Snow White and the poison dwarfs' – another indication perhaps that their job was not a popular one.

My visits to the base became so frequent – at least twice a week – that my face became well known to the guards on the gate. Even so Peter was always asked my name and the guard would sign me in.

One evening when we were heading for a party on board ship, I said to Peter 'Let's see how observant they are – give my name as Miss Thistlethwaite this time and see if they pick it up.'

All would have been well had Peter been able to pronounce it – but as he struggled I had to rescue him quickly by saying 'Thistlethwaite' indignantly to

avoid our prank being discovered.

As we drove away, I stole a surreptitious glance through the back window and saw the hapless sailor trying to work out how to spell the name. He would start writing, then cross it out and scratch his head. We had not thought the whole scenario through properly though, and as we headed toward the gate on the way home after quite a bit of alcohol Peter said 'Well you're going to have to pronounce it – I couldn't even manage it on the way in.'

'Pronounce it' I said horrified 'I can't even remember it.'

Peter wanted to get engaged, but I held back. Although my feelings for him were deep, everything seemed to be going rather fast – but he was not one to take life at a leisurely pace.

Then one evening, whilst under the influence of a surplus of 'horses necks' at a party on board the frigate CLEOPATRA, I was trying out the captain's chair on the bridge, and suddenly found myself saying 'Yes.'

Things really took off then. Peter went to see my father in a very proper manner to ask for his permission. My mother and I listened at the door. The two men seemed to be talking about everything including the weather, except the real reason for the visit. 'Why don't they just get on with it' said my mother under her breath 'my back is killing me listening at the keyhole.'

A week later, as Peter and I sat outside the Lord Nelson pub on Poole Quay, he surprised me with a solitaire diamond ring.

It would have been very romantic with the sun setting over Poole Harbour and the Purbecks, had it not been for someone being sick nearby, an overwhelming smell of fish and chips and vinegar mixed with seaweed, and an unruly mob making a lot of noise smashing glass and fighting inside the pub.

To Peter's dismay, the ring was far too large, but he regained his composure. 'Not a problem he said – I'll take it back when I go to see my parents in Brighton next week – the shop said they could size it.'

A week later, on a visit to Peter's parents, I found myself in a totally different setting surrounded by brightly coloured rhododendrons in Sheffield Park near Brighton. As we sat side by side on a wooden bench, Peter triumphantly brought the ring out once more. This time it was too small.

I began to feel a bit like Goldilocks when she could not get the size of the bowls of porridge, chairs or beds right.

Another week went by, and Peter and I were having a meal in our favourite Austrian restaurant in Bournemouth. Once more he tried producing

the ring – this time it was a perfect fit.

The zither player who provided live music at the restaurant had got to know us well. He told us he was Anton Karas, the zither player who had achieved fame by playing the Harry Lime theme for the film 'The Third Man.' He would strike up with this music as soon as he saw us enter and give us a broad wink and smile – it became our very own theme music. We had visited this restaurant during the week we met on board HMS SIRIUS and that is when we first met and chatted with Anton Karas – and hopefully it really was the famous man. He certainly seemed genuine.

Somehow it felt as though he had become a conspirator in the progress of our romance from the beginning. Our order for food was always the same. Colonel Radetski's Flaming Sword – a magnificent meat and vegetable kebab spiked on a real sword and set alight before being paraded through the restaurant to our table. It was very dramatic!

Peter was a generous boyfriend – wining and dining me in some expensive restaurants and he often surprised me with gifts of jewellery. I was bowled over by his attention. However, he was a determined character and had to be in charge.

When we got engaged, I had fondly thought we would remain engaged for a few months before arranging to get married – but Peter had other ideas.

'We'll get married in three months.' he said emphatically. 'In October.'

This threw me. Three months did not seem long enough to make all the arrangements. But nothing was going to deter Peter. It was as though I had stepped onto an escalator and could not get off.

In haste we tried to sort out the music with the organist at the church near my family home.

St. Francis Church is built on a hill. It had been designed to be an exact replica of the Church of St. Francis in Assisi in Italy, and was very High Anglican and in some ways more Catholic than a Roman Catholic Church. When I was a child there had been a group of nuns attached to the church and they took the Sunday school and prepared young candidates for confirmation.

I had achieved a certain amount of notoriety at the age of eleven when one evening after confirmation class, I was still there an hour after everyone else had gone. We had been asked to look at a long list of 'sins' and tick any we were guilty of. I was still poring over the list and ticking away when my mother arrived to see what had happened to me. 'You're too honest' she had said grabbing me by the hand and leading me home 'it's not an exam.'

The church organist was very helpful when Peter and I approached him about the music for our service. He was a gifted musician and a language teacher at the local grammar school situated next to the church.

'Would it be all right if I came down the aisle to the song "Both Sides Now"?' I asked him 'I sing it with my guitar and most of my friends call it my signature tune.'

In 1970 it was unusual to come down the aisle to anything other than Mendelssohn's wedding march.

'My dear,' remarked Nick the organist 'you can come down the aisle to Colonel Bogey if you like as long as you get me the music.'

'I'll stick with "Both Sides Now"' I said unsure if he was joking or not.

The words were perhaps a strange choice and rather prophetic as it would turn out – 'I've looked at love from both sides now, from win and lose and still somehow, it's love's illusions I recall, I really don't know love at all' – but it was the song I had made my own and the one most requested by my friends when we sat around with my guitar.

Peter left nothing to chance, even accompanying me in my search for a wedding dress – despite my protests that it is supposed to be bad luck if the groom sees the bride in her dress before the big day. It cost me £16 in a sale, was a simple satin shift with a full length lace coat with pointed sleeves over the back of the hands and a hood which gave it a medieval appearance. There was no train.

'I'm not having a conventional bouquet,' I announced 'Just a single red rose with a white prayer book. Of course there will have to be a small amount of greenery with the rose' I added, mindful of the hospital superstition about having red and white flowers or colours together which stood for blood and bandages in medical circles.

The only Saturday the vicar had clear in October was the 31st – Halloween. Obviously it had been turned down by everyone else. 'We'll take it.' said Peter quickly.

'Well I always joked I would go down the aisle dramatically to the Ride of the Valkyries one day.' I said resignedly. Neither of us had thought about the consequences of having to celebrate our wedding anniversaries in the future surrounded by pumpkins and people dressed as ghosts, witches and skeletons.

'Oh it's all a load of nonsense – superstitious rubbish.' said Peter, discarding my misgivings about the date and the fact he had already seen me in my wedding dress.

I just hoped he was right.

Chapter 03 – D Day

The 31st October 1970 dawned cold and wet. The weather during the previous week had been like an Indian summer – but my wedding day was not.

Having spent the night at my parents' home, I washed my hair and lay luxuriating in the bath.

The bathroom was at the front of the bungalow in line with the main door.

Suddenly someone was hammering on the glass and set the doorbell in motion which dated back to 1933 and had a clockwork mechanism. If it was not wound up nothing would happen at all when pressed, alternatively if it was wound up – as it had been on this occasion – it kept on ringing until someone thumped it. We had opened the door on many an occasion to be greeted by a traumatised visitor who said 'Honestly, all I did was press it...'

The bell had been fully wound on that day, and was determined to run its course until my flustered father answered – he was trying on his suit.

To my consternation I heard the voices of my soon to be husband and his brother David, the best man.

I sat bolt upright in a panic sending a tidal wave of water toward the taps, which gathered momentum as it returned and swept over the side of the bath.

'You're not supposed to be here,' I yelled 'it's bad luck.' I sang loudly to try and drown out the sound of his voice.

I heard laughter, and then infuriatingly my father invited them both in. I was now trapped in the bath and afraid to leave in case I caught sight of Peter.

Fuming I waited and waited, but there seemed to be a leisurely coffee morning taking place in the living room.

Eventually my mother knocked on the bathroom door 'Are you all right dear?' she asked.

'No' I replied crossly 'The water's stone cold, my hair is wet. Get rid of them so I can start getting ready.'

I heard my mother's footsteps disappear down the hallway – a pause – and then male laughter as they all came back towards the front door. I sang loudly once more to drown their voices and eventually heard the front door

click shut after their exit.

Emerging from the bathroom, hair limp with steam, face red with annoyance, I asked 'What did they want – was it urgent?'

'Oh no,' said my father with his usual good nature. 'They had an hour to spare so came over to be sociable.'

The day had not started well. In fact the whole week had not started well.

Peter had arranged for us to have eight days honeymoon touring Devon and Cornwall, starting with two nights at the old coaching inn at Cerne Abbas near Dorchester. A few days before the wedding however, he informed me that his week's leave had been cancelled owing to some urgent Navy trials and that he would have to be at sea at 6.00 a.m. on the Monday morning after our wedding. Therefore our honeymoon would be just one night and day at Cerne Abbas. Still it was better than nothing.

At 1.55 p.m. on the 31st October, the bridal car arrived. My father took one look at my face and handed me a brandy – an unusual step for a man who never kept drink in the house except for Christmas. He took another look at me and swallowed one himself. He later confided he thought I might change my mind about the wedding, and as he had waited long enough to offload me he did not relish the thought of me running back down the aisle and making a bid for freedom before the ceremony.

I climbed in the back of the car alongside my father. 'It would bloody well rain on my wedding day.' I said peering through the misted glass and watching the droplets of water chasing each other down the car windows. My father looked a bit shocked – he did not swear and had not realised I had already been infected by the Navy.

'Remember what granny used to say?' I continued, referring to his mother who was Dorset born and bred. She used to recite the old country superstition "so many drops, so many whops" referring to domestic violence. But at that precise moment, Peter was the one in danger of being on the receiving end of a 'whop.'

My father gave a long suffering sigh.

The service began and I had composed myself enough to walk elegantly down (insert photos 4 -7) toward the altar and my future husband. The main problem I had was in slowing my father down who appeared to be in unseemly haste to get rid of me as quickly as possible. He told me later it was nerves – well that was his excuse anyway.

Peter looked very handsome in his naval uniform, ceremonial sword by his

side and indeed all went well until he and I stood up after kneeling at the altar. He lost control of the sword which swung round and whacked me behind the knees nearly felling me to the ground. I staggered and steadied myself on his arm.

The hymns had been carefully chosen but as the first one rose to the rafters, I realised the words were perhaps rather strange. 'I Bind Unto Myself Today.....' The organist had suggested this instead of 'Oh Come Oh Come Emanuel' which had been Peter's first choice. As Nick the organist had pointed out, it was too early to use an Advent carol, but the substitute had a similar medieval lilt to match my medieval style wedding dress with its hooded lace coat instead of a veil. This had not been a deliberate theme originally, but had been set by the bargain dress bought in the sale.

As we struggled through the first verse about 'binding' I began to sense panic. It was almost as much of a faux pas as the hymn 'Fight The Good Fight' would have been.

The rest of the hymns were more acceptable, 'God Be In My Head', which I certainly hoped He would be to help me through, and 'The Lord Is My Shepherd' where I hoped He would find us a few peaceful green pastures ahead. The service ended with the Navy hymn 'Eternal Father Strong To Save' which was sung kneeling. The guard of honour in Navy uniform sang this lustily at full volume bringing tears to many eyes.

There was a bit of an issue with my mother-in-law. She had broken her leg the week before and was in plaster from the hip down, and in a wheelchair. However, this did not manifest itself as a particular problem until the procession down the aisle after the signing of the register.

Accompanied by the Hornpipe from Handel's Water Music (suggested by the organist – looking back I should have challenged some of his choices more) Peter and I led the line of parents, best man and matron of honour, unaware of the drama unfolding behind.

My father, being one for 'doing things properly', was trying to push the wheelchair with one hand so that he and my mother-in-law could process side by side. However he had forgotten to take the brake off and was getting redder in the face by the minute, beads of perspiration dripping onto his morning suit. He was on the point of collapse by the time we reached the door.

The triumphant exit under the Guard of Honour's archway of crossed swords was slightly marred by the sight of my father having to sit down and be given a glass of water by my mother – who had excelled in her passion for hats and appeared to be wearing a large pink meringue on her head.

The reception was held at the Carlton Hotel, and the Mace Bearer to the Mayor of Bournemouth had kindly offered his services as Toastmaster in view of my father's long involvement with local government.

This was very good of the Mace Bearer as he had obviously forgiven Peter for not allowing him to accompany the Mayor in the helicopter when he was taken to HMS SIRIUS during one of the days the ship was in the bay. 'The rules are strict.' Peter had argued 'I have only been given permission to take one civilian passenger so I am sorry, the Mace Bearer cannot come with the Mayor.' This was the only time I ever knew Peter stick to any kind of rule.

However, the Mayor had his revenge as once he had landed on the deck he turned to hand his official hat to Peter (as the Mace Bearer was not there). Deeply affronted Peter had passed it on to his Observer, who passed it on to the Chief Petty Officer, who passed it down the line to some hapless sailor hanging around at the end. It could have been a hand grenade the way it was being passed so quickly in a ceremony resembling a game of pass the parcel.

At the wedding reception a string quartet played gently in one corner of the room at the Carlton and our guests were enjoying themselves. However Peter and I were still waiting in the line up for my brother and a few of Peter's relatives to arrive. Half an hour later, my brother turned up to explain that Peter's cousin had suffered an attack of food poisoning at the back of the church, and he had felt duty bound to wait for her. At least that was what he said. She was very pretty though.

The wedding buffet passed uneventfully with my uncle Jack delivering the speech which had been written by my father. Although my father was brilliant at writing speeches, he hated being in the limelight so had passed the buck.

Peter's brother David, the best man, read out some very embarrassing telegrams from Navy friends. Two (which I was assured later were extracts from some technical flying manual) read as follows:-

'TO Lieutenant and Mrs. Peter Hurst, Carlton Hotel, Bournemouth

APN 76 CHAPTER FOUR. IN EVENT OF BIRD STRIKE STALLING OR EXCESSIVE TORQUE, EMPLOY MAXIMUM POWER AND ADOPT SUITABLE ATTITUDE'

And

'STANDBY OPERATIONAL APPROACH. CHECK COCKPIT. COMMENCE FAST DESCENT TO BREAKOFF. WHEN ON SIGHT CALL MOTHER FOR FURTHER INSTRUCTIONS.'

These extracts caused much mirth amongst the Navy present and much confusion for my bemused mother who could not understand it at all. She always seemed to live cocooned in a bubble of innocence.

After the reception we went through the motion of changing out of formal wedding outfits into 'going away' clothes and then left in Peter's Triumph 2000 which trailed tin cans and various other paraphernalia which it was probably best I knew nothing of.

However, we were not leaving for our honeymoon at that stage, but were only going back home to await the start of the unofficial disco arranged for later that evening. Peter and I ended up enjoying ourselves so much at this that we lost all sense of time.

'Struth it's 11.30 p.m. already.' he said glancing at his watch 'Better head off for Cerne Abbas before the hotel gives up on us altogether.'

Peter drove like a pilot. In other words as if there was nothing else on the road, and as the crow flies; and we left a trail of traumatised drivers in our wake – and later various farm animals scattered behind as we sped to Cerne Abbas in a startling twenty-five minutes through the winding Dorset lanes.

We entered the darkened building and were greeted by a log fire crackling warmly in the grate, and a sleepy and good natured Landlord. 'Don't you worry yourselves.' he said with a broad Dorset brogue 'I've been dozing by the fire waiting for you – would've waited all night if necessary for a wedding couple.'

In the shadow of the Great Giant of Cerne Abbas, a very large man with very large accoutrements carved in the chalk hillside which towered over the village and was renowned for its fertility prowess and all sorts of ancient rites, I lay listening to the sound of my new husband being violently ill in the bathroom.

I suspected he had upset the hotel he stayed at prior to the wedding. Apparently his brother and he had insisted on having an omelette for lunch – despite it not being on the menu. This was because neither Peter nor his brother David felt like eating much before rushing off to the church. The head waiter had been summonsed and an argument ensued and finally the chef emerged from the kitchen.

'It's not on the menu sir.' the chef had said emphatically.

'Surely you know how to cook an omelette,' Peter had remonstrated 'If not I'll come out and do it for you.'

You should never say such things to anyone working in a kitchen. Peter may have got his omelette in the end, but what else was in it could have been anyone's guess and he was now reaping the rewards of being bloody minded.

'What a bugger,' he said stumbling weakly back into bed after the seventh run to the bathroom. 'And I chose this inn because it scores so highly in the Egon Ronay book for good food. I was looking forward to some fantastic meals tomorrow.'

After a fitful sleep, the wedding night having been ruined and made memorable for all the wrong reasons, we went to a communion service at the church in the neighbouring village of Sidling St. Nicholas early next morning, and then dined on bread and cheese – something simple for Peter's delicate stomach.

Less than thirty-six hours after the wedding, at 5.00 a.m. on the Monday, we left the inn and drove speedily through the country lanes to the bungalow we had hired in Preston on the outskirts of Weymouth. There was not much time for Peter to get to Portland before the ship he was checking out was due to leave for its day of trials.

By 6.30 a.m. that morning I was already standing alone in the middle of the kitchen, surrounded by unopened wedding presents and wondering just what had happened – it had all been so fast.

Peter had still not returned home by 11.45 p.m. that first evening – he was night flying.

The rented bungalow seemed so empty. It had been a rather lonely day - such a contrast from working in a busy hospital followed by all the excitement and bustle of the wedding.

For the first time I was experiencing the ups and downs of being a Navy wife.

I stood at the lounge window in the dark and could just catch glimpses of the lights of a Royal Navy ship as it sailed back into Portland in the distance.

I was listening to Radio 4 for company.

Gently the music 'Sailing By' wafted from the radio. The piece of music that always heralds the fifteen minute shipping forecast broadcast from the BBC just before midnight.

There was something strangely ethereal, beautiful and calming about it as the music rose and fell like the waves of the sea. I was transported to a strange land halfway between waking and sleeping as I stood there in the dark and watched the ship's lights and black shape etched against a lighter sky move slickly across the water in the distance.

So this was the reality of being a Navy wife. Watching and waiting a lot of the time.

But I felt a sense of real pride too, and wondered if my husband was somewhere on that ship. I couldn't see any helicopter lights in the sky – perhaps he was on his way home.

I loved Peter dearly and realised that I would put up with whatever the Navy threw at us because he was worth it, and it was his career, and there was no way I was going to spoil that for him. I had heard tales of how some Navy wives, immediately they were married, tried to influence their husbands to leave the Navy, but that was so unfair. Even in the short time I had known Peter, I realised that the Navy was far more than just a job to the service people who had joined, it was a way of life that encompassed comradeship and an extended family, united in a difficult but interesting job that demanded complete loyalty and trust.

No, I was proud of what he did and proud of him – there was no way I would ask him to choose between the Navy and me. And in a way, I felt a reflected pride at being attached to the Navy, and also enjoyed the comradeship of being a Navy wife.

I crept back into bed and drew the sheets up around my neck and kept awake until 2.00 a.m. before he finally returned, exhausted.

I waited for a romantic interlude.

'That bloody hotel chef.' Peter muttered as he passed out 'I am still feeling ill after whatever he did to that omelette.'

Chapter 04 – Reality Strikes

That first week of marriage was hard. I missed the busy working life in the hospital, with plenty of people around me - both staff and patients. I missed the adrenalin rush and excitement of preparing for the wedding. Now, suddenly, my life had screamed to a halt.

What was I going to do with myself? Peter was at sea everyday from 6.00 a.m. and did not return until 2.00 a.m. the following morning when he had been night flying.

I was so used to trying to cram too much into too little time, and now I had the exact opposite - too much time and too little to do.

Peter only had a further six months to serve at Portland, and we had rented a holiday bungalow out of season at a reasonable rate which would last us until the end of his job and which would coincide with the beginning of the 'holiday let' season when we would have to relinquish the property anyway.

We did not qualify for married quarters since you had to be married before your name was even added to the list - therefore a delay was inevitable for any newly- weds.

My friends and family were thirty five miles away, and because our days in Weymouth were limited, I could not get a job in the Health Service for such a short time. I found that people were not keen to employ service wives because their lives were so uncertain.

Our bungalow backed onto the rolling Dorset hills behind Weymouth. In order to combat boredom, I walked miles each day and discovered delightful hidden treasures such as the quaint village of Sutton Poyntz - a collection of rustic cottages built around a duck pond and nestling in the hills. Sometimes I would walk as far as the white horse which was carved out in the chalk hillside, or over the cliffs and along the sea shore near a deserted Pontins holiday camp.

Our possessions were few. Of course we had some wonderful wedding presents, but they were not suitable for use in a short term let. Except that is for the present given to us by the GP my mother worked for. He was not only a doctor but also had his masters' certificate from when he had served in the Merchant Navy. He had thoughtfully given us a sheepskin rug and a bottle of champagne - and one could make use of those, even in the back of a car.

Peter's prize possession - which would follow us around to all our future

homes - stood menacingly in a corner of the sitting room, reaching from floor almost to the ceiling. It was a five foot seven inch Indonesian blow pipe with a bayonet tip - the quiver and darts hung alongside.

Peter's party trick to impress guests was to fire the darts through the pipe straight into the sofa with lethal accuracy. He had brought the weapon back after staying in a longhouse in the wilds of Borneo during the communist insurgency in the early 60s. At that time he had been in charge of a small detachment of helicopters from HMS ALBION and the squadron had based themselves in the jungle at Nanga Ghat and operated alongside the Marines.

Now married, I could no longer hide the guilty secret about my culinary expertise – or rather lack of it. I had never been interested in cooking, apart from one evening when I had rustled up a hasty meal for Peter soon after we had met. It was my expert 'throw everything into one dish' effort which comprised a packet white sauce with chopped ham, mushrooms, and peas added, and accompanied by rice. This was followed by another throw it together sweet made from a packet of Angel Delight.

He had tolerated it at the time without a moan or any comment – but now I was his wife, things were different.

I soon realised my total inadequacy with cooking when on the first meal I attempted to cook, I had to run to a nearby phone box and ring my mother for instructions about the cooking temperature for a stew. Unfortunately we were not on the telephone in the little bungalow we were renting.

Not only was it a struggle to cook for my husband, but it was a very important duty of a Navy wife to be able to produce supper parties for guests – sometimes at the drop of a hat (not a red one of course).

My confidence about cookery was already at an all time low, and not helped when one wife told me that her favourite bedtime reading was from an array of cookery books where she swotted up on new recipes. There seemed to be a bit of rivalry between wives as to who could produce the most exotic meal so the standards were being stretched ever higher all the time.

A bookshop in Weymouth had an extremely basic cookery book for absolute beginners and idiots in the kitchen, so I muddled through with this, and worked on the principle that if I flung in enough alcohol it would hide any disaster.

All went well until the 'rubber glove bourguignon' episode.

Peter had invited his boss and a few other senior officers around for a meal including a captain and an admiral – and I was thrown into an immediate frenzy and panic.

Consulting my one book, it seemed to me that a meal cooked slowly in the oven was the best bet and least likely to go wrong and I reckoned I could just about manage beef bourguignon.

On the appointed day I was well ahead with preparations and an hour before the guests arrived, all I had to do was wash up and then get myself ready.

As I plunged my hands into the washing up water, it was then that I realised the tip of a finger of one of the rubber gloves I had been wearing was missing. At first I was just annoyed at having to find another pair of gloves – then the awful realisation hit me. If the tip was not on the glove or in the washing up bowl – then where was it?

Remembering how I had cut the beef into squares in rubber gloved hands, the awful truth struck home. Panic stricken I retrieved the bourguignon from the oven and started sifting through the contents of the casserole dish in search of the missing tip.

It was no good. I had been through the whole dish three times, but still could not identify any foreign object. With so much red wine added and the redness of the meat, trying to find a bit of red rubber glove was 'needle in a haystack' territory.

I glanced at the clock. Too late to worry now, they would be here in half an hour. Only thing to do was to inspect each spoonful carefully as I dished it out at table – then when discovered – I could isolate the piece of rubber glove and smuggle it away.

Peter knew there was something wrong but had no idea what.

'Don't worry too much' he said comfortingly 'They may be senior officers but they won't bite – all nice people.'

The guests arrived and when suitably sedated by sherry or brandy, everyone was seated around the table in the flickering candlelight. The conversation increased in volume and so did the wine. It was Peter's home made brew which tasted like vinegar because he never bothered to sterilize the demijohn storage jars properly.

This was despite my insistence that in all the books I had ever read on wine making and despite some personal tuition on the subject from a divorced radiotherapist with intent other than just wine-making on his mind, this was the most important part of the procedure.

Therefore the wine fly used to have a wonderful time multiplying and doing whatever wine flies do. Some guests, who had attended our supper

parties previously and were therefore forewarned about Peter's wine, would bring their own. However, the senior officers were 'first timers' and therefore unaware. Whether vinegar or not, it was very alcoholic.

The steaming casserole of beef bourguignon stood on the dining table before me and the guests, ready to be ladled out onto plates. Carefully I dished out each portion, scrutinising it as best I could in the poor light of the candles. I prayed that the missing tip would be obvious and I could dispense with it without being noticed. However, there was no sign of the piece of rubber glove even though I knew it was in there somewhere but where exactly...

I watched everyone carefully as they ate – trying to spot someone having difficulty in chewing, or worse, choking – but all seemed well. It must therefore be left in the remainder of the dish I reasoned. People came back for second helpings until all the bourguignon had gone. Normally I would have been very flattered, but in the circumstances I was worried.

As I cleared the dishes I looked to see if there was anything left on the side of someone's plate, but no, every tiny morsel of my 'rubber glove bourguignon' had been consumed. Someone had eaten the tip of the glove and I knew it was not me. I just prayed no-one would end up in hospital that night with an intestinal blockage. That would most certainly be the end of any promotion chance for Peter.

The mysterious case of the missing tip helped my confidence in cooking immensely though. After all, if I could serve up rubber glove and everyone decided it was delicious, I must be doing something right.

Our rented bungalow was situated directly under the flight path from HMS OSPREY. During those first few weeks I grew accustomed to helicopters flying overhead. I always knew when Peter was piloting as he would circle our back garden several times, particularly if I was hanging out washing or doing a bit of weeding. I also learnt how to recognise the sound of a Wasp helicopter even before I could see it.

One of my navy wife friends told me of an embarrassing incident when she was sunbathing topless in her secluded walled garden one day. A navy helicopter hovered above her, and believing the pilot to be her husband she waved her bikini top at the aircraft, only to find out later that her husband had not been flying at all that day.

The first few months in Weymouth introduced me to a completely different way of life, and I was continually undergoing new initiation ceremonies – such as the navy wife coffee mornings.

Eager to be accepted, I decided to hold my own. Unfortunately I chose a date when the schools and playgroups were closed for a holiday. Eight wives were invited, and all brought their children who I was not expecting. As they arrived, sanity left by the window.

'Tania – do you want a wee?' was the persistent chorus from one mother, who proudly proclaimed that this was the first day her daughter was without a nappy. It was not a successful trial run either as indicated by the number of times I had to mop up the mistakes.

Meanwhile Tania's older brother Daniel had crawled under the low table and then decided to try and stand up. Cups of coffee, jugs of cream and plates of biscuits flew into the air and landed on the floor.

'Don't worry,' I said gritting my teeth 'plenty more outside.'

By now Daniel was grinding the biscuits into the carpet with his shoes, fascinated by the crunching sound.

'Emma's been gone a long time.' announced another mother anxiously. It was established that Emma was another novice at the toilet training stage, and had managed to lock herself in the bathroom where she was found wailing hysterically for help. She had been missing for half an hour, and this was evident by the decoration on the wall from hands having been placed in unmentionable substances and liberally spread.

While this drama was in action, a normal conversation seemed to be taking place simultaneously and interspersed occasionally with 'put that down Emma' or 'don't hit your sister over the head with the plate Oliver – its not nice.' I was reminded of Joyce Grenfell's famous recitation about a nursery school teacher – so it was all true after all!

During the brief periods when I was not anxiously mopping, retrieving, pouring coffee or hanging on to the table to steady it, I was aware that most of the conversation revolved around the various children's developmental stages – none of which seemed to fit in with my own previous study of child experts such as Eric Erikson or Dr. Spock.

Traumatised as the last guest left, I returned to a scene of devastation in my living room and bathroom and made a solemn vow. When I had children, I would make sure that I had much more to talk about in my life than nappies and child development.

When Peter came home and heard the story, all he could comment was 'you gave them TINNED cream – not fresh – what will people think.' He was appalled. But I came from a humble background where cream was always tinned because fresh was so expensive.

The coffee mornings were not always such a disaster. When held in other people's houses I was able to relax and made some really good friends with whom I later played badminton at the naval base.

Another baptism of fire happened late one night (or early in the morning depending on which end of the spectrum one lives one's life) when Peter came back from a naval dinner with so much alcohol in his system it would have been off the Richter scale.

This was shortly before he left his job at Portland. Both he and the admiral, who was also leaving, were dined out by the FOST staff. This meant it was an all male affair.

At first I waited up anxiously for Peter's return, but eventually gave up and fell into bed exhausted just before midnight soothed by what was becoming my favourite melody 'Sailing By' which was followed by the repetitive exotic names of the late shipping forecast – Finistaire, Heligoland – they even mentioned Portland.

Not long after listening to 'my lullaby' my eyes had closed, but they snapped open again as I heard the front door click. There followed a few bangs and crashes as my husband bounced off the walls on his way to the bedroom. Then there was a pause, and he literally fell into the room.

In the dim light I could just make out he had taken his shoes off which were clutched tightly in his right hand.

'Are you OK?' I asked.

'Shshshsh...' came the reply and I could see him trying to steady himself. 'You'll wake Mary.'

'But I AM Mary.' I said somewhat crossly.

'I mean Mary my wife.' his explanation was slurred.

By now I was wide awake. What other Mary was there?

Peter overbalanced, sat abruptly on the bed and swayed in an uncontrolled sort of way while breathing heavily.

'Can you help undo my collar' he asked, measuring each word carefully and with difficulty.

With that, he fell backwards on top of me, pinning my legs to the bed and appeared to be unconscious.

Unable to move, since his weight had made it impossible for me to shift, I

struggled to turn on the bedside light and having managed to do so, was horrified to see my husband's face turning from bright red to purple then blue. Realising he was slowly asphyxiating with the constriction round his neck, I wrestled desperately with the stud which held in place the stiff collar of the formal mess uniform he was wearing.

Unable to get my finger in between his neck and the collar as it was so tight, I started looking for some scissors.

Blissfully unaware of my plight, or indeed his own, Peter snored loudly as I tried to wriggle out from under him to get a better purchase on the collar.

Suddenly, and to my great relief, the stud pinged across the room, and his face started to return to a more normal colour. I then proceeded to undress him and get him into bed. I had no idea how weighty he could be while incapable.

Once under the cover, he regained consciousness briefly and made attempts at being affectionate.

'You can forget that.' I said crossly, reeling back from the alcohol on his breath 'How on earth did you get home?'

'Drove.' he slurred 'Took a couple of other fellows home first though – thasswhy I'm a bit late.'

'You drove...?' I asked in horror imagining the danger.

'We pilots always drive.' he said smiling as he passed out again.

I should have learnt when our honeymoon had been deleted the week before the wedding that life in the Navy is never what it seems, or what is promised.

We were looking forward to setting up home in Cornwall for the next posting. Peter had been assured he would be going to HMS CULDROSE the air station in the West Country. I therefore had allowed the 'nesting instinct' to take over, and even started knitting little matinee jackets in hopeful anticipation of additions to the family.

Therefore it was a shock when Peter arrived home unexpectedly at lunch time one day in affectionate mood. I should have smelt a rat but ever the optimist I thought he just had some extra time off and had decided to make use of it to our advantage.

'I've just been told what my next job is.' he said stroking my hair. I detected a slight reticence in his voice.

'Not quite what we thought...' he added.

We had been lying side by side on the bed. I rested on one elbow and waited.

'Umm,' he paused once more.

'Go on then.' I encouraged cautiously, realising that the fondness of the moment had been engineered in order to give bad news when I was at my most unguarded and vulnerable.

'It's not quite what we were expecting.' he continued 'I've been appointed as Fleet Helicopter officer to COMFEF.'

This meant nothing to me at the time – I had no idea what 'COMFEF' was.

'And... ?' I prompted.

'It IS a shore posting,' he said 'but in Singapore ... and it's unaccompanied because they are closing the base there at the end of the year.' That last bit was rushed out so that it almost sounded like a foreign language. I knew it must be bad news.

The Singapore bit I could understand but what exactly did 'unaccompanied' mean?

'You're not expected to come with me,' he gabbled on 'but that does not mean you can't come with me – just means we are on our own basically – no allowances, no passage out and no married quarters.'

'I don't want to go to Singapore anyway,' I said 'I want to stay in England and start a family as we planned.'

'No option,' said Peter 'I leave in four weeks.'

I lay stunned. Was this really how it was as a navy wife? Sudden changes of plans and broken promises? Peter's appointer who was in control of where his next job would be must have a sick sense of humour – that was all I could think. You couldn't get much further away from an accompanied job in Cornwall if you tried.

Peter got up and dressed. 'I've got to get back into work now but we'll talk about it more when I get home. I'll be back in time for the Magic Roundabout.'

The children's TV programme 'The Magic Roundabout' had reached cult status within the British Navy. The whole of HMS OSPREY ground to a halt by 5.30 each afternoon and a solid traffic jam formed across the causeway from Portland to Weymouth as naval staff of all ranks headed home in a desperate

attempt to get there in time for the start of the programme about a 'spaced out' rabbit called Dillon who was obviously on marijuana, a broom shaped dog called Dougal, and a strange jack in the box figure on a spring but without the box whose name was Mr. Zebedee.

Peter came home after work and started where he had left off. 'I've been trying to argue our case but they won't listen,' he said 'you can't travel with me officially but I can get you on an indulgence flight – hopefully.' he added.

He may just as well have been talking double Dutch. I knew how to indulge myself – it usually involved chocolate and champagne - but had no idea what an 'indulgence flight' might be and doubted it was the same thing.

'The RAF runs regular flights to Singapore taking servicemen out to their post.s' he explained. 'Sometimes they have empty seats, and they sell these off to family members at a reduced rate. Bloody annoying really. The chap I am replacing has had his wife out there officially for two years, but it is something to do with the base closing and they have decided to dispense with the luxury of wives. Prime Minister Wilson is handing the base back to the Singaporeans for a nominal 2s.6d. – talk about robbing the tax payer.'

And so it was, that I reluctantly spent the last month in Weymouth trying to find cotton dresses out of season, attempting to learn Malay from a book that Smiths had to send away for, and reading up as much about Singapore as I could.

The baby blue matinee jacket was abandoned and packed up. There was no way I wanted to start a family out in the Far East – all that heat and all those mosquitoes, diseases and creepy crawlies I had seen on the television documentary programmes.

One day early in the New Year, Peter arrived home from work and told me he had been promoted to Lieutenant Commander. To celebrate we had a pub meal and then went for a walk by Ringstead Bay, up on the cliff tops alongside a house that Winston Churchill had used as a retreat during the war where he could make secret plans.

Despite the 'keep out' signs, Peter in his usual controversial manner found a way we could get through the wiring – and from the evidence of droppings it was obvious that rabbits used the same entrance. We wandered around the grounds stealthily just in case there were any guards on duty.

From the cliff top and standing illegally in the footsteps of Sir Winston Churchill, I gazed over the sea toward Portland Bill. The lowering sun was bathed in a red glow which reflected off quiet clouds settled on the horizon. All seemed well with the world. It was as though I could see right into the

distance of our future together which seemed to go on forever – and despite a few false starts, the future looked good.

The final weeks at Weymouth were spent making plans, seeing friends and taking weekly trips to the sick bay at OSPREY for vaccinations and inoculations. The navy did not believe in a gentle introduction but stuck a different needle full of medication in both arms every time I went.

The worst reaction was when I had yellow fever on one side, and cholera or tetanus on the other.

I was given those injections on a day when I was expecting eight guests for supper. Having got organised well in advance I decided to go for a long walk over the hills in the afternoon for some fresh air. I had reached the half way point, when it was just as far to go back as to go on, when I began to feel decidedly unwell. The world was spinning by the time I staggered home and the evening passed in a strange haze. Later I was informed by the doctor that I should have been told to go home and rest after those particular inoculations, not take a five mile trek across the hills. But no-one had told me.

On the weekends prior to moving out, we would pack up both cars with belongings and cart them off to my parents' home where they were stacked in the roof space.

The Navy could not decide whether Peter's post as Fleet Helicopter Officer would last for the final months of the British Naval Base in Singapore, or whether it would be extended to a full two years while the ANZUK forces settled in to replace the British support.

This uncertainty made some of our decisions difficult. For instance what would we do with the cars? Peter had a well preserved light blue Triumph with its leather upholstery and wooden interior details which had many good years of service left, and the old A30 car I had inherited from my mother still worked fine – even if antiquated with little 'hands' that lit up and flicked out as indicators and a slightly temperamental gear box.

One week I had actually overtaken a Rolls Royce on the outskirts of Wareham at a place called Worgret Heath when speeding back to Weymouth from Bournemouth, and I shall never forget the look on the face of the driver as he turned and saw what type of car was overtaking him and could not help feeling smug.

'Poppy' – as the A30 had been nicknamed years before – had become a member of the family, and during those first lonely weeks as a Navy wife I even started talking to her – much to the consternation of a Weymouth neighbour whose head suddenly appeared over the wall one day fully expecting

to see me talking to a human being.

The only really worrying journey I had experienced with her was when I decided to drive back from Weymouth to Bournemouth one weekend while Peter was at sea, and as soon as I got to the top of the hills behind Weymouth I was plunged into freezing fog. The heater packed up and the one windscreen wiper stuck and I had to keep using it manually and leave all the windows open reducing visibility to nil.

'We'll just have to get rid of them both.' said Peter one day. 'It is no good keeping them in a driveway for an indefinite period - they will only deteriorate.'

So sadly he sold his pale blue Triumph – the scene of many a romantic grapple during our courting days.

I took Poppy along to a local garage but they only offered me £5 for scrap value – a real insult.

But then we heard of a young navy wife with three children whose husband had just been killed in a helicopter crash. She was the sister in law of Peter's boss and quite naturally in a terrible state. She had no transport to get the children to school – so there was the answer. I gave Poppy to her and said she could keep it as long as she needed it and I would not expect it back. The incident also brought home to me dramatically that although the pilots took flying daily as their normal routine work, accidents could and did happen, and that nothing was secure.

Our last night in Weymouth was spent packing up final bits and pieces, then Peter produced an old navy issue flare and suggested we let it off in the back garden to mark our departure. With a mighty bang and orange flame our parting gesture took off into the night air and we rushed back into the kitchen like a couple of naughty children, and pretended we knew nothing about it.

'Make the most of the fresh air.' Peter said. 'You will miss it when we are out East.'

End of Sample

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<http://www.greensmarties.co.uk>

Epilogue

Like many girls I had always wanted a hero. My hero had not arrived on a white charger and in a suit of armour, but in a helicopter and Royal Navy flying suit, but he was my hero nevertheless.

He was brave and courageous, reckless and without fear and dedicated to the Navy and his duty. He would wade into any situation believing he was always right, and once his mind was made up nothing could change it.

However, a hero cannot be everything to everyone, and my hero sadly did not understand compassion and could not make allowances for human failure and error and therefore we were a misfit from the start when I look back. Neither did he understand the word 'diplomacy' which sadly crippled what would otherwise have been a dazzling career.

The dilemma was neatly summed up by my doctor some years into our marriage. 'Peter is a wartime officer, not a peacetime officer.'

The doctor was of course right. In a war, you need people who take swift, ruthless and decisive action without too much thought for others – but I had not expected marriage to be a war, and I prefer peace.

Peter lived on adrenaline and took no prisoners, and that included his wife and children. There was no margin for minor errors or even just for being merely human.

Like many heroes, he was to be admired for much, but impossible to live with – or at least – impossible for me to live with. My confidence was drained over the years, and my feelings of self worth reduced to nothing.

But the sadness and battles at the end of our marriage cannot detract from the good times experienced in the early days. Those early days when I thought the world was at our feet and - just as on that evening when he was promoted to Lieutenant Commander soon after our wedding when we looked out across the sea to Portland as the sun set blood red on the horizon - I truly believed it was the beginning of a wonderful life-long adventure together.

I used to joke with my parents that Peter would either end up an Admiral or else be the subject of a court martial. In the end it was neither. He had the qualities of many Admirals, but had been in the wrong place at the wrong time and perhaps said the wrong things to the wrong people. His frankness and direct attitude was not always welcomed by superiors, and he could flatten those who he deemed were under him and not just comrades in the Navy, but

his wife and children as well.

Whatever the outcome though, I had a great and interesting life with my husband in the Navy, and it is for my children that I particularly write this record. So that they can see what life was like with their father before it all went so very wrong.

I had an adventure and found myself in many exciting situations not normally experienced, even by other Navy wives.

This book is for all Navy wives who find their knights in shining armour, only to discover later that unfortunately even the finest knight can fall off his horse. There is always a price to pay for those of us who marry heroes.