

A Personal Recollection

by “Snowy” White (4151) – T.S. Mercury 1952-55



I was born in London in 1939 shortly before the start of the war that was to change the lives of millions of people. I now realise that my parents were totally incompatible which is why after my father was called up for military service in 1940 I never saw him again. As a child I used to tell people that I had lost my father in the war and if they assumed he had been killed I did not correct this impression for as far as I was concerned he might as well have been dead. My parents divorced in 1947 and my mother and I were left homeless and penniless. My mother was a proud and independent woman who never sought help from her family or the state. We were what are now described as a “one parent family”, but without the modern benefits. As mother had little formal education she was compelled to get domestic work

in hotels or private houses where we lived in staff quarters and there were often periods when she was unemployed. Ever an optimist she always believed the grass was greener somewhere else so we were constantly on the move. By the time I was thirteen I had attended at least ten different schools across southern England so my education was disjointed. I was also becoming a “handful” for my mother and as I got older it was increasingly more difficult for her to find live-in accommodation for us both.

During a period when we lived near Southampton I developed an interest in ships and the sea but I do not know where mother got the idea of sending me to a training ship. I recall the Shaftsbury Society who ran the training ship “Arethusa” interviewed us in London but I have no idea why I did not go there. Shortly afterwards I applied for a Hampshire Scholarship to T.S. Mercury and with coaching from a sympathetic teacher I passed the examination. Ultimately I did not get a scholarship because Hampshire only gave three a year to Mercury and we were not considered deserving enough – if mother had had three children we might have had a chance. On the advice of the Captain Superintendent, Commander Bradby, my mother applied to The Marine Society for a bursary and so in September 1952 I joined Mercury as a charity boy. Before I went an adult acquaintance told me that Mercury was a good place because C. B. Fry ran it and I would do well there. I had no idea who C. B. Fry was and by then he had already retired but such was the legend of Fry and the Mercury.

For me joining Mercury was an adventure. Wearing a sailor’s uniform, rowing out in all weathers to sleep in a hammock in an old ship, learning seamanship, marching to a band, sailing boats and swimming in the river etc. Of course the novelty soon wore off but even today I am conscious that my secondary education was very different to that of most of my peers. One aspect of Mercury that I am deeply grateful for is that there were no height restrictions and many

small boys like me were accepted. Whilst I was never quite the smallest boy in the ship I was certainly small for my age. However, having taken you in there were then few concessions for lack of height and we bantams learned much about survival in a tall world. I recall hesitating in front of the vaulting horse and informing the PTI, Mr Harris I think, that I couldn't possibly jump it. He replied that he didn't care whether I jumped it or not but he wanted to see me try. When I went for my medical to join the Merchant Navy the doctor gave me a dubious look remarking that there wasn't much of me. He then asked me if I had done any pre-sea training. When I replied that I had completed two-and-a-half years at T.S. Mercury he gave me a knowing smile and said, "You'll do son, you'll do".

Mercury of course had many shortcomings. In the early 1950s the educational standard was definitely below average and too narrowly focused. Whilst later in life I had no great difficulties with Merchant Navy examinations I have often been aware of a lack of a sound educational base. The academic level was also adversely affected by the fact that Mercury took boys of very mixed abilities and most of the instructors in my time were retired Navy petty officers, unqualified ex naval "schoolies" or young inexperienced teachers. This did start to change, particularly after the appointment of a Director of Studies.

Apart from cross-country running, probably because it provided one of the few opportunities of getting out, I was not too keen on the sporting activities, but I do not blame Mercury for that. However, some of the routines were fairly mindless and could have been replaced by more creative activities. Certainly the Mercury put me off my original intention of joining the Royal Navy.

There was a lot of bullying in my time, much of which was perpetrated by some of the Section Leaders and older boys on the less assertive lads and bantams like me. A lesson for my life was that if you can't fight your way out of trouble you better know how to talk your way out. However, unlike some OMs I was not particularly unhappy at Mercury and for me it was probably the right place. It gave me discipline when I needed it most and pointed me to a career that I enjoyed. However, if circumstances had been different, for example had I come from a stable family background with no financial problems, would I have gone there? The answer is probably not.

I know OMs who have reached high stations in life who do not admit to having been at Mercury. Most have mixed feelings about the place and as we know from the pages of the Association magazine many are proud to have been a Mercury boy. As for me, because of my childhood circumstances, Mercury became the point of departure for my life, which is why I care about its memory and why I actively support our Association.