

A TOUCH OF COLD STEEL

When Matelots meet up to 'Swing the Lamp' the talk invariably involves the opposite sex in one way or another. It either involves a first conquest, a 'run up the line' or maybe some 'near miss' experience. In my particular case I find it difficult to suppress a chuckle when I think of Part One Training at HMS Gamecock or RNAS Bramcote back in the early 50's.

As new entry 'Sprogs' we were very much full of ourselves and always eager to extend our knowledge. Arrival at Bramcote brought some disappointment when we learned that contact with the WRNS was absolutely taboo for us as there was total segregation. The WRNS were also undergoing their own Part One Training separately from ours and the only time we even casually met was when the NAAFI van came round to the Training Hangars during Stand Easy and even this was closely supervised. In the meantime we were forced to either lust or fantasise. Each time we encountered each other their giggles merely provoked ribald comments from us for which we were usually strongly rebuked by our respective Instructors.

Whilst we were under training everyone had to wear uniform whilst on or off duty, even for night and week-end leave it was compulsory. Apart from the NAAFI when the occasional clandestine smile or conversation could be enjoyed the segregation of the sexes was strictly enforced on pain of punishment. Perhaps the only exception or relaxation of this rule was during sporting events when both sexes shared the facilities. It should perhaps be emphasised at the outset that we always considered 'Jenny Wrens' to be socially poles apart in that they usually sought the company of the older and perhaps more seasoned campaigners particularly the Senior Rates, rather than 'sprogs' and for a new entry to even have a date with a 'Wren' was almost unheard of.

There was however, one particular 'Wren' who seemed to shun convention and indeed authority by talking to 'New Entry Sprogs' and that was Shirley, also known as 'Burly Shirley' in view of her stature. Shirley was more than a tomboy who could probably out drink, outfight or out swear any of her male counterparts. She was a Leading Wren Cook and Captain of the Base Women's Hockey Team. Shirley had a magnificent physique which was more than amply displayed during Gym Training sessions when she even sweated beautifully. Everyone lusted after Shirley whose favours were in short supply and who was known to have a liking for a certain married Petty Officer Instructor who apparently did not share Shirley's enthusiasm for a liaison. Everyone liked Shirl and regarded her as a 'Good Hand' and her friendship was regarded as a bonus. I used to see her often during training sessions either in the gym or whilst running around the airfield perimeter track during early mornings or during the 'Dog Watches' and I got to know her pretty well as a 'Townie' of mine.

The only times when fraternisation was moderately allowed was in the NAAFI or on Friday nights at the Camp Cinema. Friday nights usually entailed a few pints of 'Scrumpy' in the NAAFI followed by a trip to the Cinema before 'Lights Out' and 'Pipe Down' On this particular occasion Shirl and a few of her oppos had enjoyed a few Birthday drinks in the NAAFI and were quite merry when we all made our way to the Camp Cinema over near the Hangars. If Shirl ever fancied anyone she made little secret of the fact but apparently none of the 'Sprogs' had ever made it with her. It came as a bit of a shock when Shirl made it

quite clear that she was 'up for it' that night. All the signs seemed right, the nods, the winks and the touching of hands across the aisle. About half an hour before the film ended we both made our way quietly out of the Cinema using separate aisles so as not to arouse too much suspicion. Outside we quickly dashed over to the grassed area between two Air Raid Shelters. We simply could not wait to almost tear each others clothes off in our frenzy to get at it.

We could still hear the sounds from the Cinema as we surrendered to our passions in the grass. We seemed to lose all track of time as we both became oblivious of our surroundings until I felt an ice cold object being placed across my bare buttocks and recoiling in shock I heard a voice bellowing "What the ell do you think you're doing young feller me lad"? The presence of the intruder seemed to bring us both back to reality and I turned to see the huge figure of Leading Patrolman Boniface known to us as 'The Bishop' holding a torch in one hand and a steel ended night stick in the other. In a split second Shirl and I had managed to hurriedly scramble back into our clothes as the Patrolman discreetly turned his torch away allowing us to do so and thus avoiding further embarrassment. "Go on Shirl hoppitt" Scowled the 'Crusher' "I'm surprised at you". She smiled sheepishly and hurriedly made good her escape. "Come ere you" He said, grabbing the back of my trousers. "Not so fast" Shining his torch in my face he asked my name and mess. Fearing the worst I managed my details to his satisfaction. "Come on Bish, have a heart? I pleaded. To my intense relief he uttered the words that I have never forgotten even after 50 odd years. "You can hoppitt too young Red and remember that a standing dick doesn't have a conscience at all" He remarked. To his credit, 'The Bishop' never reported the incident and each time I saw Shirl we always exchanged a wave and a grin and as far as I know neither of us ever confided in anyone about our little escapade until this day. The irony of it was several months later I managed to run into 'The Bishop' again, now newly promoted to RPO whilst on Shore Patrol in 'Guzz' where he had been seconded to the Provost Marshall's Staff. We had a quiet chuckle and his parting shot inevitably was "Met any cold steel lately"?