

Captain Henry Severs must have had a special knowledge of life aboard a cadetship. He had served his own apprenticeship prior to World War II in the BI cadetship *Nardana*. Post war in 1950, he was appointed Cadet Instructor Officer aboard *Chindwara*. Later, he returned to *Chindwara* as Chief Officer between 1957 and 1963. At this point, he was promoted to command of the sister cadetship *Chantala*, from 1963 until 1965, completing what must be a unique experience of being responsible for many cadets. Here Captain Brian Agnew OBE has collated memories and anecdotes from some of the many Henry had influenced.

CAPTAIN HENRY NEIL SEVERS

8TH OCTOBER 1917 – 13TH DECEMBER 2005

From Captain Brian Agnew OBE:

In the late 1990's Terry Lilley sought to make contact with Henry after a gap of nearly fifty years. He started his letter, a little apprehensively, 'Dear Captain Severs, You probably don't remember me but.....'. A reply came by return post starting, 'I remember all my boys.....'. Whether this was so is irrelevant, it immediately put Terry at ease and led to the three of us having an annual lunch at the Merchant Navy Hotel in London. Knowing Henry, he probably did remember 'all his boys' and for that reason alone, it is good to know so many remember him.

For myself, my own particular memory is from when I Joined *Chindwara* in the fitting out yard at Swan Hunter's in January 1950 until he left the ship about 2 years later. I was one of ten "straight-to-sea" first trippers and soon came to look upon Henry as, nothing less than, our mentor during those formative 2 years. I was therefore delighted to renew our connections with both Henry and Terry during our annual lunches for about 5 years. John Cooley, now a retired River Thames river pilot, also joined us on one occasion. Christmas card exchanges followed, which prompted my enquiry when one was not received in December 2005, and then the discontinued phone line, before a copy of the death certificate finally confirmed Henry's passing.

Henry got on well with Ruth Germer(?), Honorary Secretary of the Royal Overseas League in Sydney, and, between them, they arranged our social activities. The outings to Hunter River, North of Sydney, the 'Showboat' harbour cruises and the ship's dances come to mind. So many memories spring to mind when I look at Henry's pewter tankard inscribed "Presented by the Cadets of ms Chindwara Xmas 1951", which I was able to acquire from the auction during the BI Glasgow 2006, reunion.

Henry, or, as Terry would say, "He who must be obeyed", possessed the qualities of good leadership, the likes of which we shall not see again.

Those who knew Henry, will immediately recognise the accuracy of Peter Paget's pen picture of him aboard *Chindwara* in 1950-1951:

"I remember Henry Severs so well. Amusing, clever and incredibly energetic. Looking back at my tender age of 18'ish, I suppose he was no more than 32 himself – but he possessed a 'presence' rarely found.

Indeed, with some 30 apprentices to control, he needed that power to ensure our respect; and he certainly got it.

It was more than just his ability to impart his very considerable knowledge of all things maritime – from keelsons to haversines – but his infectious enthusiasm, which certainly has remained with me throughout a long and varied life. As I look out over the loch towards the Western Isles and at our wee Frances 26 at her mooring, I have Henry to thank for my knowledge of tidal streams and charts – not to mention the Rule of the Road.

To be fair, we didn't do much sailing in *Chindwara*, but we did have the whaler in which we licked the pants off the RAN in Sydney. How were they to know that ours was a special one-off, lightweight version - built (I think) in Norfolk (Not Pompey Dockyard) – and Henry knew when to keep his trap shut!!

But, perhaps, my most abiding memory is of him running – rugby ball in hand – with all the power of an unstoppable express train!

Oh! And that pipe!!"

Likewise, Tom Miller-McCall was a 1st Trip Cadet aboard *Chindwara* – September, 1959 to October 1962 – when Henry Severs had returned to *Chindwara* as Chief Officer. His memories also paint an accurate picture:



"He rarely had to say anything. He always projected purpose, commitment and acknowledgment. He kept his head straight or slightly tilted (usually to the right).

The look was intensive, and he never overlooked or dismissed anything, major or trivial. If anyone was in front of him intent to waste his time – my advice – look and retreat fast. When he had reason to approach anyone, or he was approached, the changing expressive looks on his face were awe-inspiring.

That glint in his eyes spoke mischief, mystery and intensive enquiring. The greatest I had the honour to know at sea or ashore."

Sometimes our memory plays tricks, as Ian McWhannell (Angus), freely admits:

“I wonder if my memory is correct, but when I joined the *Chindwara* on its second voyage with Peter Paget, we had, in Melbourne, a reprisal against local youths, near Flinders Street Station, that was organised by Henry Severs.

If I remember, it was necessary to go ashore correctly dressed, and a small group of cadets were, because of the blazers or uniforms, pushed and shoved in the small park next to the river by Flinders Street Railway Station, by a group of Australian youths.

It was decided to put the following action into play the following evening. I believe it was Henry Severs that planned the “attack”.

Two or three cadets, again in uniform and picked for their ability to look like “live bait”, were sent to the same park where the cadets had been roughed up the night before. (Possibly one would be Cadet Shaw who looked like an angel). However, this time, a very large group of cadets in civilian clothes were at hand.

The same group of Australian youths started their verbal and physical attack but suddenly found that, instead of three in uniform, they had most of the cadets from the *Chindwara* to deal with, and I believe some of the Australian youths landed in the river. Why I say I am not sure is because I was ship keeping and only remember the return of senior cadets who felt that “rough justice” had been carried out.”

This has some feint resonance with Terry Lilley’s memory, who agrees the young Shaw would have been perfect bait. But would Henry really have been implicated in such planning? Well, he did have pre-war cadetship experience, aboard *Nardana*, to call on!

An anonymous contributor recounts two more memories from *Chindwara*’s early days.

Firstly:

“In 1951, when the *Chindwara* and *Chantala* were berthed in close proximity, upstream of Sydney Harbour Bridge, the *Chantala* carried out an unprovoked attack on the *Chindwara* during one night. This caused great official displeasure on the part of the two captains and the Sydney office.

Henry Severs had to deliver the official warning to the *Chindwara* cadets, mustered in the mess-room. Under no circumstances, would the company tolerate any reprisal action against *Chantala*. As Henry left the mess-room door, he leaned back and said: “So, if you have anything in mind, I don’t want to know!”

That was challenge enough. At dawn two days later, *Chindwara* delivered grievous retaliation on the *Chantala*. The company never allowed the two ships together in the same port again, and, although Henry carried an unmoved face, his eyes seem to say, "Well done lads, they deserved it!"

And secondly:

"Henry used to keep the watch between 16.00 and 18.00 at sea. In 1951, towards the end of Ramadan, aboard the *Chindwara*, the Cassab (Storekeeper and lamp-trimmer) who led prayers daily on No.5 hatch, came to the bridge. He indicated to Henry he wanted to borrow some binoculars. Henry offered the communal Kershaw 6x30 pair supplied by the company. The Cassab demurred, his eyes fixed on the splendid Ross 7x50 pair, hanging around Henry's neck: "Nä Sahib, burra wälla", still not releasing his gaze on Henry's binoculars. Henry feigned a puzzled look and then his eyes changed to a look of mischievous defeat: "Oh, atchā", said Henry as he passed his Ross 7x50's over. A jubilant and victorious Cassab went onto the starboard wing to search for the star that would announce the end of Ramadan. Who said eye contact had no meaning?"



Henry Severs
Mike Feltham Peter Hayward
Cadet Shaw (background)

Chindwara circa 1950-51

Ken Fernandez gives an insight into life aboard a BI 'normal' ship and shows that there's always more than one way to reach a goal:

“Joe D'Souza and I were cadets on the *Umaria* in 1952/1953. We joined the same day on 14th January 1952. The ship was in Victoria Dock, Bombay, and we had recently passed from the Training ship *Dufferin*.

When we joined the *Umaria*, the master was Captain Jackson. After one complete voyage – Persian Gulf-India-Japan-India – we got a new Chief Officer, Mr. Severs.

That was when our troubles began. Severs came from one of the BI training ships (C Class) and being used to cadets as part of the crew, he tried to run us two cadets as a school ship. Instead of allotting work each day he told us: “The Captain's deck is your part of the ship. Look after the decks, the rails, the lifeboats and lifeboat gear, all paintwork and woodwork. The Captain would inspect each Sunday”. The idea was good. It would have worked well except that Joe and paint pots did not combine well. After Joe dropped a pot of white paint from the davit head on to the holystoned wood deck we were demoted.

We lost the Captain's deck and were relegated to the boat deck, atop the engineers' accommodation. Besides the engine room fiddley, the skylights, and the library, there were also two lifeboats on this deck. Another dropped paint pot, a dropped water-container from the lifeboat, and we were again demoted. We were now given the forecastle to maintain. This was all very well, but it was uncomfortable in inclement weather.

It got worse. The nadir was reached when Lord Inchcape, the Chairman of the Company was to visit the ship in Singapore. We were told to study in the dining saloon where we worked on the correspondence course supplied by the King Edward VII Nautical School in London. The Lord was expected to visit in the forenoon.

When His Lordship had not turned up even at 1400, Joe decided that he would not be coming at all. He felt drowsy and went for a lie-down on the settee. You've guessed it. Inchcape and Severs did the rounds at 1500, and Joe was found napping. We were taken off the forecastle maintenance and began painting all the toilets on the ship.

On the credit side, we were given turns at the wheel on Sundays, watch-keeping from 1600 to 1800, daily navigation exercises set by the second mate, and poetry paraphrasing work from Captain Jackson!

A highlight of the days on the *Umaria* was the grand feast provided on the occasion of the Queen's coronation in June 1953. By this time the Master of the ship was Drew, a tall, well-tanned bearded skipper, who loved to shout from the bridge “Let go the anchor” much to the annoyance of Severs, who would ignore the bellowing voice and point to the fo'c's'le telephone. There were some words exchanged regarding that.

One would get the impression that a clumsy painter would end up as a failure in life. On the contrary, after obtaining his Master's certificate, Joe became a successful businessman and made a small fortune. It just goes to show that business acumen, enterprise, and entrepreneurial skills have nothing to do with ability with paint and brush."

Michael Jobson reveals that a Cadetship was a place where you had to learn quickly, and sometimes the hardway:

"All this talk of Henry Severs prompts me to recall my first experience of him when he was First Mate on *Chindwara* in 1960.

My first trip, certainly my first week if not my first day, on ship keeping in London docks. Mr Severs went ashore as I was on the gangway, and when he returned some time later informed me that I had 2 hours 'overtime' – the standard punishment. I thought 'What was that for?' I was about to learn that officers were to be saluted when going ashore. I thought I had opted for the MN over the RN to get away from all that having been in the CCF etc., at school.

Nevertheless, I think Mr Severs was a good First Officer, and I am sure a good Captain."

Tony Lucas has a vivid memory of an experience of a lifetime to share:

"I sailed with Henry Severs for 3 years as Cadet on *Chantala* 1962/5.

We were in Port Sudan, (Red Sea) with ETD 1300. The next port of call was Aden.

At 0600, our No. 2 Lifeboat set off, out of Port Sudan towards Aden, with a crew of about ten cadets (probably chosen because they needed to take life a bit more seriously!!)

The intention, of course, was for the *Chantala* to catch up with the lifeboat and retrieve, the exhausted cadets, having had the experience of their lives!!

Sure enough, about mid afternoon, when we had been in the lifeboat in the blistering heat all day and couldn't wait to get back aboard the '*Channy*', we were so pleased to see her come over the horizon behind us. A short while later we suddenly realised that she wasn't heading for us – i.e. hadn't seen us!!

Any amount of flashing with Aldis lamps, heliographs, and waving shirts on the end of oars etc., seemed to make no difference, and she sailed on over the horizon in front of us. You can imagine the panic!!

However, this had been done deliberately, and we soon saw her return back again to pick us up! A practical exercise in the appreciation of the strength and dangers of sunshine had been had by all!!!”

Two contributions bring out memories of working with Henry during his ‘Command’ days, rather than being a cadet under his tutelage.

The first from the Engine Room, Jim Meldrum remembers:

“Ahoy there! The first and only time that I sailed with Henry Severs was on the *Sir Tristram* in the late sixties. I was the 2EO. This was the first ship that he had commanded that had ‘bridge control’.

He was like a boy with a new toy! He had absolutely no idea about these shallow-draught L.S.L’s and seemed to think that they started and stopped on a sixpence. When manoeuvring, the engines would alternately race then slowly stagger. On one particular memorable ‘berthing’, the stern slammed into the jetty with such force as to (almost) lose our balance. From then on he was referred to as ‘Henry Knocks Severs’ in appreciation of ‘Robin Knox-Johnston’ who had recently concluded his trip on *Suhaili*.”

In addition to serving aboard *Chindwara* as 2/O, Barrie Sanderson later sailed as C.I.O aboard *Chantala* when Henry was in command. Perhaps Henry’s management style could be defined as ‘modified consultative’:

“The time I remember best was as C.I.O., with Brian Biddick as C/O and Henry Severs in Command, from October 1963 to March 1965, although it seemed much longer at the time!

I do not remember much about the 2/O time aboard *Chindwara*, but when I was *Chantala*’s C.I.O. life was much more exacting. Henry was a very fit man and played all the sports in a manner of someone much younger. He was ideally suited, therefore, to the Cadetships where sport featured regularly in every port. It was my responsibility to arrange most of the social activities ashore and on board. These deck games were an essential part of the Cadet training, and, fortunately, there were very few Cadets without skills in one sport or another.

Brian and I met with Henry in his cabin at 0800 every day, regardless of the time we got to bed the night – or morning – before. He was a stickler for routine, and everyone knew what was required and when. Our morning meetings were what these days are called ‘feedback sessions’ when we reviewed the previous day’s events, what had gone wrong and right. We then would go through the projected day’s activities.

If things had misfired, then we were informed of this in no uncertain fashion – he would not mince words and could – and did – make us feel very uncomfortable. However, once done with, all would be well, until the next time. The Cadets benefited from a strict routine and certainly gained in

strength – mentally, physically and in their development as adults. I feel there are not many who did not appreciate this.

He was extremely fond of military band music, and, apart from playing this in his cabin, arranged for two enormous music speakers (of the sort that would put a modern disco to shame) to be on board. These were placed facing outboard each side of No. 3 hatch on entering and leaving port, and military band music would be blasted all across the harbours and ports as we arrived and departed. The Radio Officer (mainly John Field) had the responsibility of playing the music tapes, woe to him if anything failed. However, as a very placid Marconi man, not even Henry could shake him. I was amazed in those days of the volume a tape recorder could produce.

The Cadets would be lined up as per RN style – OK, this may have seemed a bit over the top, but I think not. Henry induced a real pride in the BI and the ship, which everyone accepted and appreciated. This attitude also produced some pretty good results at the various sports, too. He tended to turn a blind eye to the various “Ship and Travel BI” signs which appeared from time to time, mainly on harbour walls but occasionally on other ships. He did get somewhat annoyed once when the “p” had been turned into a “t” by some opposition.

To sum up, I remember him as a very fair but strict man and a devout Christian, who rarely missed attending a service at the Mission to Seamen chapel when in port. I sailed with three or four other C.I.O.’s, all of whom were men dedicated to the job, but I think even they would agree that Henry was almost ‘made for the job’. Naturally, he was not everyone’s ‘cup of tea’, and I think it is fair to say that you either got on with him, or you didn’t, there were no half measures. As a new 2/O, I did certainly buckle under his pressure. He did not stand fools lightly, and you had to give as good as you got. Once I learned that and stood up for my beliefs, reasons for doing things and basically myself, we got on very well.

My wife and I spent the river cruise at the Bristol Reunion with Henry – the last time I saw him, some 42 years after our first meeting. An amazing man, he was still knocking back the pints and smoking his pipe. In view of the fact he has now left us, I am so glad we were able to talk over our times together.”

John Stanton writes:

“After the *Madura*, I joined *Chindwara* for her second voyage in October, 1950, as a cadet, which was when I first met Henry. Later, I was 4/O and served as 2/O on *Chindwara* during 1957-1958, when Henry was C/O of the ship.

I last saw Henry when he was in command of (I think) *Woodara* or one of the W's. I came across him in Sydney during the time I was seconded to the RAN, but our meeting was fairly brief, and I never had occasion to see him again. I heard later that, when he left BI, he had some position with the

Fremantle Missions to Seamen, but I found no record of him when last in Perth during 1977.”

Brian Agnew concludes:

“In 2004, I was not able to join Henry and Terry Lilley for our annual lunch. My place was taken by Brian Tracey, a fellow student of Terry’s at the University of Greenwich. Brian wrote to Terry:

“I was indeed very sorry to hear about Captain Severs. I know from the way you spoke of him that he played a very important part in your life from the time you joined the Cadet Ship at the age of sixteen. When I met him with you for lunch at the Union Jack Club, it was not difficult to see why you held him in such regard. Not only was he a convivial and generous host, but he was prepared to share some of his wide knowledge with me, about the Lascar seamen, which was a great help to me in preparing my dissertation.”

Thanks to Tom Barnett’s website, ‘Recollections of a BI Cadet’, I include *Chindwara*’s first voyage cadets (in order of seniority) and I am confident they would all count themselves fortunate to have known Henry Neil Severs:

N.Pickering, J.M.B.Wells, H.Nightingale, L.P.Conway, A.B.Weller, C.H.Oppen, J.H.Killick, R.Webb, W.Dinsdale-Young, J.Edwards, J.C.Forbes, C.P.Smaje, M.R.Corfield, A.M.Bolus, G.J.Wright, D.J.Harker, S.D.Lester, R.Jackson, G.Scott, D.J.Neal, P.E.Hayward, E.Leech, J.G.Kemp-Luck, G.Cruikshank, A.E.Dove-Meadows, T.D.Lilley, T.N.Robertson, B.H.Agnew, R.Sharp, P.M.Ireland, M.R.Callender.

Finally, the tribute from **Tom Miller-McCall**, a cadet aboard *Chindwara* – September 1959 to October 1962 – when Henry was Chief Officer, puts into context the experience of many of us. Tom writes:



“I was based in Saudi Arabia from 1971 to 1978 and met Henry on Far East ‘A’s several times and remember he left the sea and took up a position in the Mission to Seamen, Dubai, approximately 1975.

I can vividly recall my memories of the most outstanding, professional gentleman and mariner-monumental. His last letter told me he is now the altar boy at his local church and spends his time cleaning the altar brass work!!!

Fantastic. His guidance, help and assistance remained with me in thought through my lifetime. Over the years I always landed up with some problems and thought what would he have done. We won through each time!!!”