

Leading light

At just five years old, James Weatherall wanted to join the Navy. Today the retired Vice Admiral looks back on a seafaring career beyond his wildest dreams

INTERVIEW AND TEXT: SANDRA FRASER



Captain of HMS ARK ROYAL, 1985

Search for 'James Weatherall' on the internet and a hatful of entries come tumbling out of the ether. Many a small boy has declared that he wants to join the Navy; few achieve a distinguished career that culminates in the post of Deputy Supreme Allied Commander Atlantic, followed by a decade in the Diplomatic Corps.

Sir James admits that his fascination with the Navy started when he was only five years old. During his tender years he amused himself by collecting pictures of warships. His long association with the Sea Cadets started when he was a pupil at Gordonstoun School in Scotland, but he is quick to emphasise that though he joined the Sea Cadets with his eye on a professional life at sea, the organisation is far more than a simple recruiting tool for the Royal Navy.

He recognises that in today's society there

are places where being a Sea Cadet takes strength of character – with areas where being part of a youth organisation isn't the 'done thing'. "I'm delighted a large number see their way to a career in the Navy, usually for a jolly long time," he says. "But the real worth of the Sea Cadets is in making a good citizen."

For a youngster like him, focused on one ambition, the Sea Cadets was a natural stepping stone. "I wanted to command a battleship," he says. "I eventually got an aircraft carrier. The only other thing that I ever wanted to do, but I didn't have the money for, was to buy a farm."

Though Sir James has many glorious memories of seafaring, it's his time in command of some of the best-known ships in the British Fleet, including HMS ARK ROYAL, that make up the high points of his career. "It's what I always wanted to do," he says. "I commanded five [ships]. And all in their

different ways gave me huge satisfaction."

With such a long career to look back on, it's not surprising that commanding a ship during the Cod Wars and the Falkland Islands conflict are uppermost in his mind when I ask what the most difficult times were.

Though he remembers other important challenges in his professional life too. "Nothing compares with letting other people practise ship handling with your ship," he says, adding: "You've got to let them go long enough to recognise when they've made a mistake, but not so long that you can't rescue it."

"The consequences can be so severe," he adds with calm understatement. The most hair-raising such moment for Sir James was in Norway, when his ship was being guided through a very tight passage and he had to accelerate using a huge amount of power to avoid a disaster. "We just squeezed through, but I was waiting for a very nasty noise," he

says with a laugh that clearly belies nerves of steel.

Sir James confesses he had never heard of the job that followed his active service at sea, far less dreamed of it as a young boy. He had served on the staff of the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (NATO) as Rear Admiral, and the Deputy Supreme Allied Commander Atlantic, when he was approached to take on a role in the Diplomatic Corps. His wife, Jean, as the daughter of a highly respected politician, was a known asset, he says, praising her support for both his work and the British nation. "I always said they got two for the price of one," he says.

Sir James became Her Majesty's Marshal of the Diplomatic Corps and later Extra Equerry to HM The Queen, and one of the Queen's Commissioners for the Lieutenancy for the City of London. His work involved meeting world dignitaries, rubbing shoulders with royals from all nations and behind-the-scenes tact and diplomacy to ensure occasions unfolded smoothly, sometimes as a result of a quiet word in the right ear to avert offence. In the New Year's Honours List 2001 he was made

a Knight Commander of the Royal Victorian Order; he is also a Knight Commander of the Order of the British Empire.

Sir James has also been actively involved in WWF UK, the International Social Service UK, the Marwell Zoological Preservation Trust (Marwell Wildlife) and Gordonstoun School, besides being a Liveryman of the Worshipful Company of Shipwrights, and Prime Warden. He was also chairman of the Sea Cadet Association from 1992-98. He lists his hobbies as stamp collecting and trout fishing, and returns to his native Scotland for regular holidays. He and his wife Jean have lived in the same house in Hampshire for 44 years.

Sir James still maintains a keen interest in The Marine Society & Sea Cadets and was delighted when the two organisations came together, considering them perfectly complementary. His twins' names are engraved on the bell of TS Tartar, Finchley Unit – they were christened on board – and he has fond memories of the TS Wizard, Haringey Unit, the first Sea Cadet unit he looked after. He received the Sea Cadet Medal in 1998.

Now 73 years old, he feels it is only fitting

that he should enjoy more of his retirement, but with his interests in wildlife conservation and young people's futures, as well as a family of five grown-up children, it seems unlikely he will ever really take a back seat in life. With so many memories to draw on, it's telling that he says nothing will ever compare to the fun of commanding HMS ARK ROYAL: a boyhood dream come true. ✂



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