

Captain James Briggs, Royal Navy. Naval Eulogy

Funeral Wednesday 23rd May 2018 at 2.30 pm

St. Peter's Church, Dorchester, Dorset.

I first met Jas more than 60 years ago at the Royal Naval College Dartmouth, and although subsequently we only served together once we have kept in touch over the years.

Putting it in simple terms Jas was everything that an officer in the Royal Navy ought to be. He was bright, clever, and efficient with a wicked sense of humour as well as being a delightful companion and loyal friend. He was a natural leader of men and this comes through very clearly in the course of his time in the Royal Navy, which lasted for some 38 and a half years.

At Dartmouth he did well both academically and down on the river. This was an important part of Dartmouth life. On leaving Dartmouth and after two cruises in the Cadet Training Cruiser HMS Devonshire he went as a midshipman to the cruiser HMS Superb. As a generation we were lucky to be joining the Navy as it then was. It was a worldwide organisation, with fleets in the Mediterranean, Far East, South Atlantic and the West Indies. It was the world before mass travel existed so everywhere we went was different and exciting to young officers joining the fleet. In the Superb Jas was reported on by his Captain as being an enthusiastic and promising officer. How true that assessment turned out to be.

After what was the last part of a young officers training, a spell at the Royal Naval College Greenwich and the various specialist schools in Portsmouth Jas joined HMS Loch Alvie for service in the Persian Gulf, as the ship's Sub Lieutenant and subsequent promotion to Lieutenant, where the forecast from his Commanding Officer was that he will do well in the Service.

Thus, after such a promising start in March 1955 Jas went off to join Coastal Forces, or the 'costly fasties' as they were affectionally known. After cutting his teeth as a First Lieutenant he got his first command, a Gay Class Fast Patrol Boat where forty knots was a reality. I wonder if in today's world the Royal Navy would be able to name a class of ships 'Gay something!! It was at this time that Jas and I served together, he in his Gay boat me in my 'Dark Boat' HMS Dark Avenger.

In coastal forces a fair amount of time was spent in the Baltic operating with the Norwegian, Danish and German coastal Forces. It was on just such an occasion that Jas and I were sent off to carry out a night exercise. Towards the end of the night we found a promising looking target on our radars and resolved to carry out a simulated torpedo attack. It was slightly

foggy and dawn just breaking as we formed up and made our attack, it was only when we broke out of the mist up close that we realised that our target was not a merchant ship but a giant Sverdlov Class Russian Cruiser. We turned on our heels back into the mist expecting to be blown out of the water and made our way home to our mother ship.

On arrival we expected all sorts of problems arising from what might be described as a hostile act or diplomatic incident. Happily we heard no more about it and have dined out on it ever since. This sort of activity was just what Jas had joined for.

Following this very happy time as a commanding officer of one of Her Majesty's Ships Jas went back to HMS Dryad at Southwick, the Navigation School to become a specialist navigator, he was top of his course.

After brief interregnum in the carrier HMS Centaur as officer in charge of Tenders he joined HMS St. Brides Bay in Singapore and she was deployed for the Borneo Patrol and in March that year escorted the Royal Yacht Britannia to Hong Kong. Back in Singapore the ships company were used as extras for the making the film 'The World of Suzie Wong' a famous film about beautiful girls in Hong Kong, as many of us thought, right up Jas's street!

Jas's next move, in December 1960, was to the Daring Class destroyer HMS Diana, the ship that was at that time described by her Captain, Captain Kirkby, as having a distinctly complex personality. 'Apart from being the huntress, by the light of the sun she was pure and chaste; by the light of the moon however she became abandoned and dark'. Diana was the ship present at the nuclear tests in 1956 and there was an issue about her radioactivity and the effect on her crews, which continues to this day.

He came ashore after this to do the Staff Course and the Dagger Navigators Course. He was top of his course on both counts.

December 1965 saw him back at sea in HMS Phoebe as the navigating Officer and took part in the emotionally charged evacuation of Aden, a moment of history. However this was followed by the start of a series of commands afloat when he, as a Lieutenant Commander took command of HMS Ulster the navigational training ship. It was here that his wicked sense of humour began to show itself, for example inviting his Sub Lieutenant to jump overboard in full uniform in order to provide a demonstration of the man overboard drill. I believe that unfortunate officer is here today! On another occasion a former sailor in Ulster wrote: "Yes he was known as Basher Briggs. I remember once we were off Sandown Isle of Wight; I was EM of the sea boats crew. He stopped the ship ordered the sea boat away and we had to get him a bucket of sand

and an ice cream all duly returned to ship. He then refused to pick us up, and sailed off to Pompey leaving us to make our own way back, good fun had by all".

There was also the occasion, which I am sure has gone into the annals of history when Ulster on one foggy summer's day crept into small tidal Cornish harbour and, with her bridge between the breakwaters and her bow among the fishing boats at the end of the harbour, the loudhailer asks: "Good morning, can anyone tell us where we are?" Reply from small boy with bucket and spade: "Mevagissey". From Ulster, backing out into the fog: "Thank you. Don't forget to join the Royal Navy". Unfortunately it got into the Western Daily News, following which Jas was ordered by the Admiral at Plymouth to explain himself, in full uniform, in person, and with a written report in triplicate.

Another former sailor wrote: "Yes 'Basher' Briggs was my first Captain on Ulster, mad as a hatter, used to stop the ship and fire with his shotgun at anything he saw floating on the ocean, he used to come to work each day, when in Dockyard, on his beat up old LD Lambretta, wearing greatcoat and Leather helmet, but, he never used a Pilot or Tug when coming into Portsmouth, always did it himself, very good when he was on the bridge."

Whist in the dockyard with Ulster close to the cruiser HMS Blake in dry dock Jas spotted a fire in the Blake. Together with a leading hand he went over to Blake and distinguished the fire. For this act which probably saved a lot of lives and severe damage to the he was awarded a Commander-in-Chief's commendation.

From these little stories you will see that he created loyalty and affection from his sailors.

He was soon after promoted to Commander and transferred to HMS Tarter. There is a lovely letter from his outgoing Yeoman of Signals to his successor. He was described as a ball of fire, and there should be no trouble from him provided the halyards are bar taught and the bridge windows clean. The letter also mention his inclination to use his personal firearms when opportunity offers a habit that extended into his retirement sailing days in Poole harbour as means of sending empty beer cans to the bottom.

During 1970 he was in the Persian Gulf still driving Tartar where his best sport was taking the Mickie out of the local Royal Air Force base!

In 1971 he came ashore and became the Captain of HMS St. George a training establishment for senior rates on their way to officer

commissions this appointment was another success for Jas and gave him a strong recommendation for promotion to Captain.

However in December 1972 he was sent back to sea again, this time as the Executive Officer or Second in Command of the famous Aircraft Carrier HMS Ark Royal. This was again a most successful tour of duty for him and quite rightly the result was that he was promoted to Captain. However there is a penalty for such success and that is a sojourn in the Ministry of Defence in his case as Naval Assistant to the Chief of Fleet Support. As was to be expected he made a great success of this complex job and his reward was command of the Second Frigate Squadron first in HMS Apollo and then HMS Diomedé.

Now I have been through this chronology of Jas's naval life since it is a remarkable record. He commanded no less than six ships at sea, a remarkable achievement.

In today's navy, officers are lucky if they get one or perhaps two in a full career.

In short Jas was archetypal of the finest officers the Royal Navy has had. He was considered, with some justification, one of the best ship handlers of his day having a flair of being able to place his ship exactly where he wanted it. He was widely admired for this ability. He was enthusiastic in everything he did and zero notice unusual drills was his way of training his officers and men.

I personally have great admiration for the Victorian Prime Minister Viscount Palmerston, and it so happens Jas also admired him as no doubt many other Captains in the Royal Navy do. Why?

For he said 'If I want a thing well done in a distant part of the world, if I require a man with a good head, a good heart, lots of pluck and common sense, I always send for a Captain of the Royal Navy' In my view he was describing Jas who was what every Naval Officer hoped to be.

He was a good friend to many, an impeccable seaman and a Naval Officer of the highest order whom we all will miss greatly.

Thank you.

Michael Fulford-Dobson