



London Calling: My First Navy Duty Station

How a Young Sailor's Dream Assignment Became the Adventure of a Lifetime

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A Sailor's Dream Assignment

My first permanent Navy duty assignment was as a clerk typist on the staff of the Commander in Chief, U.S. Naval Forces Europe. Essentially, for three of the best years of my life, from ages 20 to 23, I pounded a typewriter in an office building at the U.S. Navy's European headquarters.

What made this assignment so special was the location: 7 North Audley Street, in London's fashionable West End.

To make it doubly special, we were not permitted to wear our military uniforms. We reported to work wearing suits and ties. We did have monthly personnel inspections in uniform, though. We were also required to find our own civilian housing, for which the Navy provided a generous meal and lodging allowance. Finally, and this was the best part, in those days overseas shore duty carried the same status as sea duty!

For a young sailor barely out of his teens, it was about as good an assignment as the Navy could possibly offer.

From Yeoman School to London's West End

I reported for this wonderful duty after completing six weeks of training at the Naval Training Center in Bainbridge, Maryland, where I learned the Yeoman rating. A Navy yeoman is

essentially a clerical assistant, responsible for correspondence, records, reports, and other administrative duties.

I studied hard and graduated first in my class, which no doubt influenced the Navy's decision to give me this plum assignment. So I set off, footloose and fancy-free, for the adventure of my life and the strange experience of serving in a foreign country that spoke our language, but somehow didn't.

My first year as a staff yeoman wasn't particularly exciting. I worked in the Operations Division, one of the busiest offices in the headquarters. My principal responsibility was processing paper copies of classified Navy messages. It was an intensely boring job for a yeoman of my caliber. Finally, because I could type approximately 80 words per minute, I was moved to the front lines of actually typing the very messages I had previously been sorting.

A Navy Chauffeur in London

Like most sailors, I also had to stand duty watches. Until I was promoted to E-5, my watch assignment was as a duty driver. My job was to transport the Navy captain serving as the headquarters duty officer to his London residence in the evening, then pick him up and return him to headquarters the following morning.

The Navy provided a sedan for this purpose, complete with a steering wheel on the right-hand side. That took a little getting used to, as did driving on the left side of the road. London traffic was no picnic, even in those days, but I soon learned to navigate its busy streets with reasonable competence.

When I was promoted to E-5, my driving duties ended, and I was placed on the all-night duty yeoman watch bill in the headquarters command center. This sounded like an important responsibility, but most nights there was precious little to do. I spent much of the time watching the clock and waiting for morning.

London After Five O'Clock

Whatever shortcomings my Navy duties may have had, they disappeared when five o'clock arrived. I was out the door and heading back to the London life.

I shared a bachelor basement flat in Paddington, about ten minutes west of Marble Arch by Underground or the Number 12 double-decker bus. My roommate had arrived in London several months before me and had already connected with a social circle that included some of the nicest English people—blokes and birds—you could ever hope to meet.

And could those folks ever party!

London was an exciting place to be young. The Beatles were emerging on the British music scene, the first James Bond movies were appearing in theaters, and the city seemed to be entering an entirely new cultural era. For an American sailor from St. Louis, it was quite an education.

Had I not met the love of my life one quiet Friday evening at a Queensway ice-skating rink, I fear I might have developed a serious drinking problem—or something worse!

The Best Advice I Ever Received

Eventually, I began to tire of the endless partying and drinking. One day, I asked my landlady, a kindly Englishwoman named Mrs. Flexnee, where I might go to meet young women who were, well, a little more wholesome.

Mrs. Flexnee had a suggestion: "Why don't you try the ice-skating rink?"

That may have been the best advice anyone ever gave me.

At approximately eight o'clock on a warm June evening in London, I went to the Queensway skating rink and met a 17-year-old English girl who would become my wife and travel the world with me.

I had gone looking for a pleasant evening's entertainment. I found something considerably more important. We were married after about a year's engagement in a simple civil ceremony at the Kensington Registrar's Office. My wife's parents were generous and loving people who eventually got over the fact that their youngest daughter was actually marrying a Yank!

My mother-in-law was especially wonderful. She treated me like the son she had never had, and I came to regard my new English family with tremendous affection. My wife and I are still going strong after over 60 years of marriage. We're both proud great-grandparents.

A Young Sailor Witnesses History

Not every memory of my London assignment involved office work or the pleasures of living in one of the world's great cities. During those three years, I found myself present at several important historical occasions, sometimes as a spectator and sometimes representing the United States Navy in uniform.

One of my more unusual ceremonial assignments involved the London premiere of *PT 109*, the 1963 motion picture about Lieutenant John F. Kennedy's wartime service as a Navy patrol torpedo boat commander in the South Pacific.

For the occasion, I was assigned to stand in uniform on the steps leading to the balcony of a London movie theater. It wasn't exactly a demanding military assignment, but it was certainly a memorable one. There I stood, representing the United States Navy at the premiere of a motion picture about the naval exploits of our sitting president.

I couldn't have imagined at the time how tragically the story of John F. Kennedy would change before the year was over.

On November 22, 1963, I was having supper in the U.S. Air Force enlisted men's club when word arrived that President Kennedy had been shot in Dallas. Like millions of Americans, I was stunned. Being thousands of miles from home made the tragedy seem even more disturbing. We

were young Americans serving overseas, and suddenly the country we represented seemed terribly far away.

It was a sad and homesick time for all of us. Yet I also remember how our English friends shared our grief. Their sympathy and genuine affection for Americans were especially comforting during those difficult days.

A little more than a year later, on January 30, 1965, I stood among thousands of British mourners lining the streets of London for the state funeral of Sir Winston Churchill. I watched as the Royal Navy gun carriage bearing his flag-draped coffin passed in solemn procession. It was a moving sight, made even more memorable by the knowledge that I was witnessing the final farewell to one of the great figures of the Second World War.

World leaders had gathered in London to pay their respects, and I was able to see some of them from a distance, including French President Charles de Gaulle. Here I was, a young American sailor, standing among British citizens as some of the most important figures of the twentieth century came together to honor the man who had helped lead Britain through its darkest hours.

Only six months later, on July 14, 1965, another prominent American statesman died unexpectedly in London. Adlai Stevenson, the former governor of Illinois, twice a presidential candidate, and then our ambassador to the United Nations, suffered a fatal heart attack while visiting the British capital. This time, I was more than a spectator.

Stevenson's flag-draped coffin was placed in the lobby of the American Embassy, and I was among the uniformed American military personnel assigned to stand honor guard. I remember standing watch beside his coffin, a young Navy petty officer participating in a solemn tribute to one of our country's distinguished public servants.

It was a considerable departure from my ordinary duties of typing Navy messages and standing overnight watches in the headquarters command center. I felt honored to have been selected for this ceremonial responsibility, however briefly.

In less than two years, I had experienced the grief surrounding President Kennedy's assassination, watched the funeral procession of Winston Churchill, and stood honor guard for Adlai Stevenson. These were extraordinary experiences for a young American sailor whose first Navy assignment had seemed, at the outset, little more than a wonderful opportunity to live in London.

From Old London to New London

By the end of my three-year tour, I had reenlisted in the Navy and received orders to the submarine base at New London, Connecticut. That's right. From Old London to New London.

Our first son was born in a suburban London hospital in 1965, and about a year later we prepared for the first of what would become many moves as a Navy family.

I was permitted to request transportation back to the United States by ship, and we were booked aboard USNS *William O. Darby*, a troop transport that would carry us on a six-day voyage to

New York. We even had our own private passenger stateroom with bunks and private toilet facilities!

Our dining arrangements were also first-rate. We shared a table in the dining room with another family. We even had our own dedicated steward who took our orders and fetched our meals. I was just an E-5, and our trip across the Atlantic was absolutely wonderful.

Our son's first birthday party was celebrated at sea, appropriately enough, somewhere about halfway between England and the United States. It was a fitting beginning for a child whose mother was English, and his father had chosen a Navy career.

Three Years That Changed My Life

Looking back, my first Navy assignment was far more than an enviable tour of overseas duty. It was an extraordinary introduction to the world, a firsthand encounter with history, and an experience that shaped my personal life as much as my Navy career. Few young sailors could have asked for a more memorable beginning.

My London years also gave me a front-row seat to an extraordinary period of cultural and historical change. It was an exciting, sometimes sobering time to be a young American abroad, and the experiences left me with memories that have endured for more than sixty years.

When I finally returned to the United States, my Navy career was just beginning to take shape, and America's involvement in Vietnam was moving toward the war that would define so much of the coming decade.

There would be other ships, other duty stations, long deployments, and experiences I could scarcely have imagined as a young yeoman pounding a typewriter in London's West End. But none would have quite the same influence on my personal life.

Of all the duty assignments the Navy gave me during my career, London was undoubtedly the most fortunate. I went there expecting three years of adventure. I came away with a wife, a son, and the beginnings of a family that would accompany me through the rest of my Navy career and beyond.

Not bad for a young sailor whose principal qualification was typing 80 words a minute.