

Lessons from the sea

FULL CIRCLE

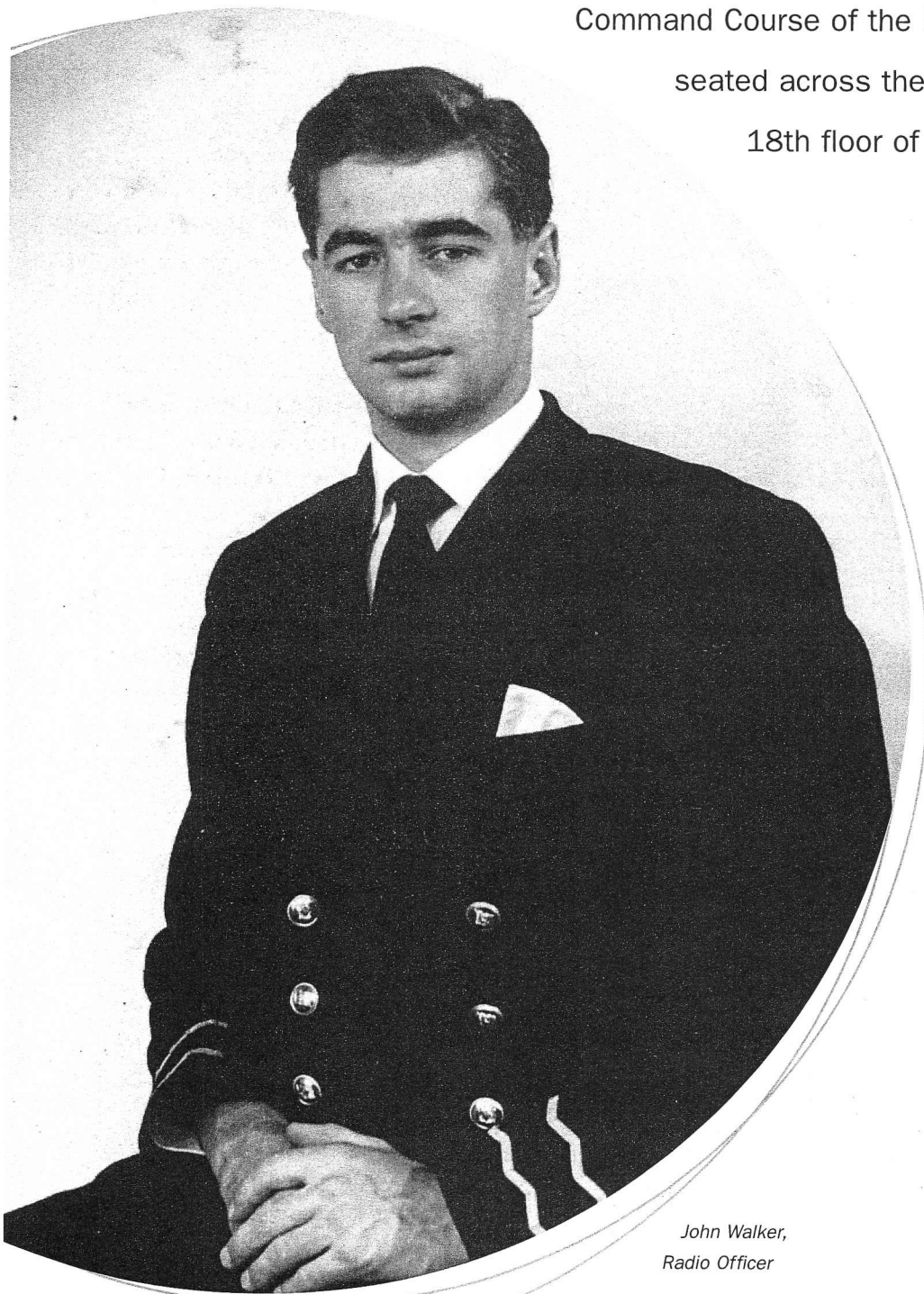
JOHN WALKER

The scene is Hong Kong Police Headquarters, June 2005: The twenty or so senior superintendents on the Senior Command Course of the Hong Kong Police force are seated across the spacious classroom on the 18th floor of the new Police headquarters

I am discussing with them issues about leadership and core values in organisational cultures. As they talk in small groups I gaze beyond them through the sheer glass windows looking onto Victoria harbour, with the backdrop of Kowloon and the ubiquitous Star Ferries. A quarter century of experience as a lecturer and consultant slip away and once again I am a very young Radio Officer on the Blue Funnel ship *Tantalus* in Hong Kong, outward-bound to circumnavigate the world, and inward-bound to mature as a man.

I had come full circle. The early lessons about life, those learned in the Merchant Navy, the people I met and the broadening of my world experience were all waypoints on a transit that was to take me to a master's degree and my own international behavioural practice.

At sixteen, I was a young Glasgow kid heading for disaster. After leaving school early, I got in with a group of tough kids and succeeded in getting fired from my first job as an apprentice at Yarrow's Shipyard. An overheard conversation between two



*John Walker,
Radio Officer*

Radio Officers (R/Os) on a tram was my *deux ex machine*. I approached my parents about going to the Glasgow Wireless College and they agreed. They were at their wits' end by this time.

Glasgow Wireless College was a life-changing experience and not without its dramas. I still hadn't learned to study and now became surrounded by marvellous characters from all walks of life who drank and partied as hard as any group I was ever to meet. They were in many ways misfits, missionaries and madmen. I was in my element. It was wonderful.

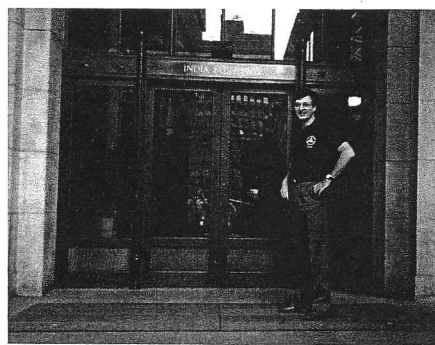
But **LESSON 1** was coming my way: *If you don't make people accountable they'll never get the message.*

After two suspensions and the threat of being expelled for non-performance and being 'unduly affected by alcohol' in class I finally got my act together, started studying and scraped through my 2nd class radio licence. With the help of a friend of my long-suffering dad, I was offered an interview with Alfred Holt & Company (Blue Funnel and Glen Lines).

I had never been more than 100km away from home on my own before so the trip to Liverpool for the interview was as nerve-wracking as it was exciting. When I walked through the huge brass doors of India Buildings in Liverpool I knew I was in serious adult territory. I had just turned eighteen.

LESSON 2: *The kindness and support of others is a powerful motivator to behave differently.*

A kind gentleman in personnel at Alfred Holt & Company made me feel very welcome. After going through a medical, I was sent over to Birkenhead to meet the Superintendent of Wireless, a small man whose main goal in life appeared to be to keep me out of the company. I naturally gave him back as good as I got. He in turn recommended to personnel that I was not suitable. The personnel officer



John Walker at the India Buildings, where his sea career began

said to me that I hadn't done that well but no-one ever did with the Superintendent. He added, 'You will make a fine officer; you are ready for it. We would like you to join the *Monmouthshire* in London two weeks from today'.

LESSON 3: *Give people responsible jobs, hold them accountable and they will be challenged and motivated.*

I joined the *Monmouthshire* in London on a bucketing cold wet day in August 1960. The ship wasn't even there, only a big empty space met me at the dock. I was miserable and had to spend a night on another company ship where the atmosphere was less than warm, as if I were a strange foreign interloper in their club (an

early experience with silo thinking).

The next morning, *Monmouthshire* was alongside. After reporting to the First Mate as instructed, the Master called me to his cabin. I remember him having a chest full of WWII ribbons, lots of braid, a large red beard and a strong highland accent. I sighed with relief that he was one of my own kind.

He began by giving me a good bollocking about everything from my age, being a lowlander, my soaked appearance and my general state of increasing terror. He then gruffly said to me: 'We will be going up north to Gdansk. There are lots of old unexploded mines floating around there. What happens if we hit one and sink?' (It turned out we were actually going to Antwerp.) I stammered something about SOS and taking to the boats. Then, leaning forward he asked: 'Who would be the last person off the ship?' I confidently replied: 'You sir!' He responded, looking me dead centre in the eyes: 'Aye laddie, and you and the senior R/O would be the second last'.

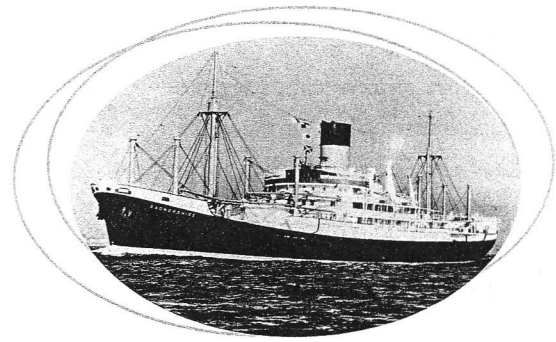
LESSON 4: *Effective leaders use 'Situational Leadership'. They adjust their leadership to suit the level of readiness or maturity of the follower.*

My first Senior Radio Officer was a Welshman called Yangto Morgan who, rumour had it, once fell into the dock and, when dragged out, heard someone shout, 'Yangto Morgan is in the drink', and immediately dived in to save himself.

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FULL CIRCLE continued

A typical Alfred Holt & Company ship, Radnorshire (7,632grt), built 1947 for Blue Funnel Line as Achilles, transferred to Glen Line as Radnorshire, then back to Blue Funnel in 1962 as Asphalion(2). Later transferred to Dutch flag and renamed Polyphemus, only to revert to Blue Funnel in 1972, again as Asphalion; in 1975 sold to Gulf (Shipowners) Ltd, London and renamed Gulf Anchor. Broken up 1979



He was, however, without realising it, a good model of an effective 'situational leader' – and a loveable rogue. He made me feel very confident before I had to make my first radio transmission. He kept me calm and focused on a straightforward message that he had written out for me. He stayed close without crowding me when, for the very first time, I called up Liverpool Radio and transmitted 'TR Monmouthshire bnd Suez'. And got an immediate sharp and fast 'QSL' (received). I had begun the first steps of becoming a real Radio Officer. Over the next two weeks coasting around the UK and Europe, Yangto gave me increasingly more challenging tasks, supervising me less and less, until I was fully competent and motivated.

LESSON 5: *An essential trait in command leadership is an understanding of the human environment.*

My first deep-sea trip was on the *Tantalus*, a wartime-built Victory ship modified to Holt's exacting standards. We loaded sand ballast, and in late November in foul weather sailed for Houston, the east coast US ports, up to New York, then a full circumnavigation back. It was to be my first experience of the power of hurricane-force winds. Sleepless and bruised from being thrown out of my

bunk every night (we had no lee straps – only the mattress in our bunks jammed up at an angle) and generally being thrown around, I listened to the screaming wind, and dinner plates being smashed. The Master was a small, barrel-chested, red-headed Welshman with a fierce temper. I was highly stressed. The Senior Radio Officers in the Alfred Holt fleet also acted as pursers, and ours had long ago lost interest in radio work. I was on my own.

One day we were hit by a huge wave in a spume-streaked and confused sea. The turnbuckle holding my chair to the deck snapped. I was thrown back and knocked out. When I came to, there was seawater in the radio room, the main transmitter was half off the wall, drawers were spilled out and the radio room was a mess. After getting the once-over from the male nurse ('no blood – you're fine'), I was back on continuous watch. I was exhausted, and still a bit concussed. The Master was shouting down the phone about the lack of comprehensive weather reports, calling me a useless #\$\$\$*&&. I was under severe pressure. I was still all of eighteen.

The First Mate came down to see if I was OK and realised I was in trouble. He put a fatherly hand on my shoulder and said, 'I'll send someone

down to help out'. Ten minutes later, a Chinese seaman handed me a piece of paper. On it was the weather forecast as read from the bridge half an hour previously. He said: 'Chief Number One Boss says you know what do'. I was concussed but not stupid and immediately typed it up on an official radio weather report form, addressed it to the tyrant on the bridge and sent it back up. Problem solved, no harm done. We did this until I eventually got a legitimate weather report from an American station in Florida.

LESSON 6: *A wise leader never underestimates technical expert power.*

While on the *Neleus* in Hong Kong, on my second deep-sea voyage, I accidentally ended up in North Point after a lost night out in Wanchai bars. To my horror, I was two hours late getting back on board and the ship was due to sail. I figured I might as well turn myself in to the agent and get sent home – career over.

Looking across Victoria harbour I saw the ship was still there. It's hard to miss a Blue Funnel ship. The minute my feet hit the first rung of the gangway we were on our way. Still in my civvies and seriously hung-over, I was ordered up to the bridge. The Master gave me the biggest

public bollocking of my life in front of the pilot, the third mate, middies and the helmsman. The bollocking was justified but I was aware that we didn't move an inch until I was on board.

Curious as to why, I later looked over the ship's articles and discovered she couldn't leave port without me – the 19-year-old hung-over radio officer. That's expert power and effective leaders recognise it, particularly when they are leading change.

LESSON 7: *If technical experts also have connection power they can have a significant impact on management's brilliant ideas.*

A year later, the company tried to get R/Os to stand night watches in port. They thought we'd be motivated by a ten-shilling pay rise. They were wrong. It was doomed to failure. We had power through our radio connections. We called each up all over the world, eventually threatening to tie up every ship in the fleet in port. We had no union. It was a spontaneous reaction. Holt's backed down and never raised the issue again.

LESSON 8: *Leaders recognise that mentoring and being recognised for capabilities can have far-reaching effect.*

In 1963 I was taken off the *Neleus* on a second voyage to Japan and hospitalised in Kobe. There were so many foreign Merchant Navy patients there we called it the Kaisai Maru.

In the Kaisai Maru I shared a room with an American literature professor and beatnik from Stanford university. He was busking and hitchhiking around Japan, an almost unthinkable activity in the early 1960s. In a neat

piece of Japanese creative thinking they put him in hospital instead of jail while they decided what to do with him.

We quickly became firm friends and would wander down to the small nearby bar in our hospital gowns to drink saki and play pachinko. In the time we spent together he opened my mind to the endless educational possibilities that would never have been available to me in the UK. He encouraged me to go to university and convinced me I could be successful.

Two years later I emigrated to Canada and hitchhiked to San Francisco from Toronto. I walked into the bar where he hung out with his students, beatnik poets and artists and the fascinating flotsam of San Francisco culture. He was sitting at the bar as I walked in, and his first words were . . . 'What took you so long?'

Eight years later, after completing my B.Ed and becoming English Department Head in a large high school, I began my Master's degree in Organisational Behaviour at the University of Sussex.

LESSON 9: *Truly great companies have a core of corporate values that they enshrine in everything they do.*

I had been working for almost 15 years at the time of my program at Hong Kong police headquarters, where I began. Many of the stories I quote had their genesis in life on board Alfred Holt & Company ships. They were beautifully designed iconic sea-going ships, built to Holt's Class, known and respected all over the world.

Blue Funnel and Glen Line ships journeyed to the most amazing places in the Far East and beyond, after unloading and loading cargo around the European ports. They were passionate and disciplined about arriving in port on time and emphasised a high level of accountability, balanced with evident care for their crews. That care was exemplified when Sir Lawrence Holt joined forces with the Outward Bound movement to teach young British sailors the vital survival skills necessary during World War II.

Thinking of it overall, the one thing that has most influenced my personal and professional life is the importance and effectiveness of a great culture built on a foundation of core values – 'Holt's Class'.

Hong Kong Police Headquarters June 2005: Great cumulative storm clouds and lashing rain boom around the classroom, giving Hong Kong an exciting and vibrant dimension. The candidates on the Command Course are leaving the room. We have had three good days together. The life lessons and stories from so long ago have again added a flavour and reality to the syllabus.

I'm tired and exhilarated.

Full circle. ⚡

John Walker has a behavioural science practice in Sydney and spent time as Bosun's mate on Sydney Heritage Fleet's steam tug Waratah.