

# Chapter 1

## Growing Up

I infuriate my children by still regarding anything that happened after World War II as 'recent'. They were born in 1947 and 1948 so I suppose their point of view is understandable, as is their irritation when I reminisce on such things as a pint of beer at ninepence, a packet of cigarettes for one shilling or a gallon of petrol at one and sixpence. 'Try living in the present Pop', they say, 'and forget about the past'. In spite of this I am encouraged to try and write this book by the fact that they don't seem to tire of tales of my experiences in World War II and in the hope that any reader may find it of interest too.

My mother was clever enough to give birth to me on 10.10.10., the 10th October 1910, and I have always stoutly maintained, quite untruly, that it was at 10 minutes past 10 in the morning, so that my real date of birth is 10.10.10.10.10. We were, I suppose, a middle class family, not upper-middle or lower-middle but middle-middle. The family consisted of my father, a broker on the London Stock Exchange; mother who was one of the large Victorian family of an Exeter estate agent; my sister Marjorie, the eldest of us children and four years older than myself; my brother Paul two years older than me; and lastly, myself, inevitably known initially as 'Little Dick' and remaining that as far as my mother was concerned right up into middle age.

I have always regarded myself as a country person and a non-city dweller, though it didn't start that way. I was born in Hampstead and my very earliest memories at the age of about four and a half are of Queens Road, Richmond where we lived, of walks in Richmond Park, and of World War I soldiers being billeted on us from time to time. All this came to an abrupt end in 1916 when my father decided that mother and the children must leave London to avoid the Zeppelin raids, and we were moved to a very small semi-detached house in West Worthing while father stayed on in London for his work. At that time we three children were aged roughly ten, eight and six and, I suppose as children of that age, were not much affected by war, but for our parents it was a very different kettle of fish. My mother suffered a sudden and severe reduction in her standard of living and was left on her own to bring up three young children. Gone were her nanny, cook and parlour maid and I don't think there was too much money to spare either; none of which really affected us children much, especially me as the youngest.

My memories of those early war days in Worthing are mostly pleasant. We of course had no car but thought nothing of the two mile walk to the beach with our picnic food, nor of the five or six mile walk to High Salvington on the Downs behind Worthing where we used to have tea at the Windmill. A particular treat in the autumn was a train ride to Angmering (about six miles), thence by pony and trap to Angmering Woods where we spent the day blackberrying. They were happy days for kids but I guess worrying and difficult for parents. Only once as a seven year old was the war really brought home to me and that was on the beach one day in 1917. There was a muffled explosion way out at sea and some hours later we saw a ship's boat (it looked huge to me) approaching which pulled up on the shingle right below our beach hut. A lot of men got out carrying another who was struggling and screaming in the most terrible manner. They were the crew of a ship that had been torpedoed and the wounded man had been dreadfully scalded in the engine room. My mother and all of us children were very upset and shocked and I have never forgotten it.

I had been going to school at a kindergarten called Miss Thacker's in Grand Avenue. I only mention this because it was here that I met a little girl called Fay, and it was this little girl whom I married, nearly 30 years later, soon after World War II ended. We had planned to marry before the war but the outbreak of hostilities put a stop to that and we had to wait until August 1946. In case anyone is wondering I hasten to add that we are still happily married and looking forward to our Ruby Wedding in 1986!

My last memory of World War I is of walking along Worthing seafront on Armistice Day waving a Union Jack, but I was still too young to really appreciate the importance of the occasion.

It was six months or so before father rejoined the family. During the first two and a half years of the war he had been a special constable in London, only an occasional and part time job. He was over age for call-up for military duties but in late 1916 he finally volunteered, was accepted, and served in one of the County Regiments as Private Partridge for the rest of the war.

With peace, life began to return to normal and the family fortunes to recover rapidly. We moved from our little semi-detached into quite a large rented house with a big garden and my brother and I were now at a Worthing preparatory school. Father was a senior partner in his well known stockbroking firm and in the boom of the early twenties must have made quite a fortune. At any rate it was large enough, in 1923, for him to announce that he was retiring.

We were now well into the years of peace between the two wars and the family fortunes were to continue to flourish until the Wall Street crash in the early 1930s. In September 1923 my brother and I were sent to Eastbourne College. I was only 12<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> years old, rather young for a public school, but it was thought that we would be company for each other. I managed to survive my first year or two there, but I can remember a shed tear now and then. Public schools were still quite tough in those days!

Father bought a large house in West Worthing and the next seven years were spent in comparative luxury. He also bought a car, a Vauxhall 23/60. This was in the days before General Motors had taken over Vauxhalls, and the days of the great rivalry between the 3 litre Bentley, the 3 litre Sunbeam and the Vauxhall 23/98. Our Vauxhall, a large open tourer, was hand-made and hand-painted by craftsmen and served the family magnificently for 150,000 miles. I can remember our chauffeur, Stanley Hart, having to go to Vauxhalls for a three week's course before we took possession of the car. Many a time this car took the family from Worthing to Cornwall, 256 miles, in eight hours; not bad for over fifty years ago. We were all great Cornwall fans, which stemmed from the fact that my mother and father spent their honeymoon at the Watergate Bay Hotel, a few miles north of Newquay. They fell in love with Cornwall from that moment and we children obviously inherited this love. Every year we used to rent a house on the beach at Porth just north of Newquay for June and August. For many years the family spent happy summer holidays there, in fact until we children grew up and went our separate ways.

Brother Paul and I were working our way through public school and in 1927 he left Eastbourne College for Oxford to read Law. He was there for four years and, although a degree evaded him, he distinguished himself by getting a Tennis Blue and playing for the University for several years. Curiously enough we three children were all good at games; I say curiously because although our parents played some not very good tennis they could not be described as good games players. My sister

Marjorie played badminton for Sussex for several years and was an above average tennis player. My brother played tennis for Sussex for many years as well as playing for Oxford, and I was a reasonable tennis, squash, badminton and rugby player.

After my brother left I had two more years at Eastbourne College and ended up as captain of the rugby XV and second Head Boy of School. It was during these two years that I began thinking of a service career, and I find it very difficult to explain why. There was no history of service careers on my father's or mother's side of the family. I think it must have started when I was about 15 and friendly with a boy who was superannuated and whose father was planning to send him to the training ship *Worcester*. This sounded terribly romantic and exciting to me and I immediately wrote to my father asking to be taken away from Eastbourne and sent to *Worcester*. Father had the good sense to stall me and said we would discuss it at Christmas, a good six months ahead, by which time of course I had forgotten all about it. But perhaps this incident had sown the seeds of a desire for a career at sea.

Two years later at the age of 17½ I finally decided that I wanted to join the Navy and it was agreed by my father and the school's career master that I should take the Civil Service Examination for public school entry into the Royal Navy or Royal Marines in the summer of 1928. This was a stiff competitive exam and one's chances varied a lot with the number of vacancies and the number of applicants. One had to state one's preference for the branch of the service and I gave Navy (Executive Branch), Navy (Engineering) and Royal Marines in that order. The exam took place at the Civil Service Commission in London and consisted of three or four days written exams and an interview in front of an interview board, chaired by an Admiral with senior naval and marine officers as members. This interview was no mean ordeal, but was of great importance as it carried a lot of marks and a poor showing could more than cancel out any academic brilliance shown in the written exams.

Suffice to say that I failed to be accepted for any of my choices at my first attempt in the summer of 1928 and was talking to my father about going up to Cambridge to read Engineering. My housemaster then pointed out that there was another Civil Service exam in December for which I was eligible, and he persuaded me to have another try. This time I felt I did better and the terrifying, but all important interview went quite well.

The end of term came on 17th December 1928 when a telegram arrived which read as follows:—

`You have been appointed a Probationary Second Lieutenant in the Royal Marines and will report to Captain Phillip Royal Smith-Hill, Royal Marines at the Royal Naval College, Greenwich on the 2nd January 1929.'

My service career was about to begin.