

Wellington College Field Gun forming and Training

I joined Wellington in the autumn of 1977 and was asked to run the Naval section of the CCF, which I accepted. After a few years of taking advantage of the local gravel pits for sailing, designing and putting into action an assault course, and giving various courses on navigation, and so forth, it became obvious to me that the section needed "spicing up" with a rather more demanding challenge and I thought back to my time in the RN (which had finished for me in 1974 as a Lieutenant-Commander Submarine and Anti-submarine specialist and in charge of Officer Initial Submarine training at HMS Dolphin).

I decided to take advantage of the fact that the Chief of the Armoury was Chief Petty Officer Edwin Harris, who had, most extraordinarily, also been the Chief of the Parade Ground at Dartmouth Royal Naval College when I was under training. Evidently I remembered him when I came to Wellington. More surprisingly, since there had been more than 150 young officers who joined Dartmouth with me, he remembered me. We got on well. I knew that Edwin had been a "heavy end" in a Command Field Gun crew, that is personally "running" with the gun barrel (weighing 996 pounds) helped by one other. This is the man, I thought, who can put into practice my idea of bringing a tough, difficult and exciting sport to the CCF. Initially my idea was to use only Naval section boys but it became obvious later that I would have to appeal to the whole CCF for recruits. Chief Harris thought about my idea, laughed and said "Quite impossible. Neither the parents of those involved, nor the Master would ever allow such a dangerous sport here, (this sport can and does occasionally kill some semi professionals in the RN) the rigging is impossibly expensive and the Navy unlikely to help. You need an enormous amount of time available to train such youngsters and we don't have it. However, if you can get it off the ground, I shall help and I know your assistant in the section, Jeremy Hutchinson, will help too".

I then went to the Dockyard in Portsmouth and saw the Chief Rigger to explain our needs for main wires, ramps, ancillary rigging and so forth. He agreed to help where he could but advised me to contact the Portsmouth Field Gun Crew at HMS Excellent, Whale Island, to acquire lots of their cast-off or surplus field gun gear. The Master, David Newsome, was surprisingly enthusiastic about the enterprise and encouraged me to go ahead. Naval lorries brought the gear up from Whale Island and the Dockyard. The Head of CDT agreed to help where necessary in manufacturing cotter pins and so forth. I contacted a carriage wheel-making business in Kent and ordered wheels for the gun carriage and limber. We aimed for half-size gun and limber. The Head of the CCF, Martin Tinniswood, was also keen to get the thing off the ground.

By the time the gear came and we got some volunteers together it seemed that Armoury Field would be ideal for training and "running" but that we would need to start with a public exhibition on South Front in front of former high ranking OW RN and RM officers. Once the invitations were sent out this would give us no room to put off the event and put pressure on us all to get things started. (Unlike Brexit, there was a real dead-line!). Edwin was amazed that things were coming together and keen to help. I contacted the Chief Trainer ("Number 1") "Spanner" Slingsby (who looked like a figure from Desperate Dan!) at Portsmouth who agreed that we could have the gear we needed from them and that we could also go down to watch their crew train when possible. Things began to move and Edwin wracked his mind for the best way to help with the details of training. In the meantime he and I agreed that the section would present a Continuity Drill marching squad with rifles on Speech Day which he would train. I had invitations sent out to about a dozen former or present senior OW officers for an October "run" on South front 1984.

It is true that not all the rigging we wanted was available (we had no martingales for example, the wires which anchored the base of the 28 foot spar to swing the first two across, but Luke Harrison, one of our strongest runners in the section, could manage to anchor it even if he was lifted off the ground in the process !

The Continuity squad got good and it became evident that their display would be an attraction on Speech Day. Sadly, at the build up to this, Edwin Harris was hit by a heart attack during training on South Front and died shortly after. I gave the keynote address at the funeral in Wellington Chapel.

This left me, muggins, holding the baby. I had to learn very fast the sort of details that counted and kept boys safe. I also leaned on "Spanner" (Boris) Slingsby and also Chief Petty Officer Keith Mack (holder of the world record as No 1 at Portsmouth when they achieved a timed run of 2 minutes 40 seconds) to come up to Wellington to help train the crew. Both men complied. Slingsby's comic approach appealed to school boys. For instance he would say "Poor Messers Braidwood and Hutchinson only teach two subjects each. I teach three : the run out, the run back, and the run home !"

The Autumn show on South Front passed off pretty well with 18 young men from the CCF performing in front of the officers' stand in good weather. The Head Gardner probably never forgave me but the Master was impressed and saw the potential publicity for the school. Things had begun to move. Later we acquired the full gear necessary, formed two teams, one for a fast run, one for a slow, instructive run and always performed on Speech Day. Later still Earl's court beckoned and London performances in front of 25,000 spectators, but that was after my time.

I loved it all and the boys enjoyed their training enormously. Jeremy Hutchinson, who had been marvellous in supporting me and particularly had a very « professional » commentary for the crowd on public runs, agreed to keep things going when I left.

It was all more fun than parading in front of Queen's Court !

SRB