

War Years at Saltus

by

Michael Darling

By 1940, my brother, who is five years older, had returned from his school in England but he left again in 1942 with *John Burland* to join the navy. Rationing started to intensify by 1940. Ships coming to Bermuda were sunk by the U boats blockading Bermuda. Horses and cattle were starving and my father started a serious vegetable garden. This situation continued for a couple of years until the Americans arrived to build their army and navy bases. With their arrival came much needed food and other supplies and, equally important, jobs for Bermudians as, understandably, Tourism had dried up.

My mother went to work for the Admiralty decoding secret messages and we often did not see her for days. My father kept the business going on a shoestring and also worked as a censor at the Cable Office. As events unfolded in Europe and the Far East, my parents and their friends were worried but for us life went on in much the same way.

I had been at Saltus for two and a half years when war was declared. The implications of war did not create too much of an impression; however, that was soon to change as events unfolded.

School lunches under the Headmaster's house were discontinued because of rationing. Instead we went home to lunch on our cycles.

The biggest impact on life in the classroom was the arrival of English boys who had been evacuated from Britain. *Dick Butterfield* and I had been happily leading the class in academic results when in came *Colin Goldsmith* and *Tony Michelson*. We never saw the top again! (ed.note: yet, when he finally returned to England, *Colin Goldsmith* found himself approximately a year ahead of his contemporaries in science.) Almost half the school was made up of English boys and they certainly made an impression. Some were sons of naval and army personnel stationed in Bermuda but others had arrived with their mothers and sisters leaving fathers behind to fight and in many cases to die.

When *Winston Churchill* stopped here on his way back to England, we lined the wall as he passed the school in the Landau on his way up the hill to Government House. He gave us a big "V" sign as he passed by. Another time, I remember watching the Royal Naval gun carriage and all the sailors marching by on the way to *Commander Cochrane's* funeral at St. John's Church.

We were well taught at Saltus and had a dedicated staff. "*Buck*" *Rogers* was a great character proclaiming with a loud voice that, as Latin and Greek scholars, he and the Bishop were the only "educated" men in Bermuda. *Harry Richardson* taught Geography—his son was in my form -- we worked on his father's farm with *Jimmy Vivian* and slept in bunks in a converted packing case.

In our form, poor *George Leseur* was always in trouble and got caned quite often. *Bobby Booker*, the Headmaster was known as *REEB* (his initials) and was a good English Literature teacher (he loved "gobbets" – I can't remember what they were but they seemed to be underlined in our Shakespeare primers). He kept a range of canes from thick to thin and would invite his victims to choose. Discipline was strict and caning was the last resort. Detention was dished out for most misdemeanors and we would have to do lines which certainly improved my handwriting (although time has reversed that).

We received Recs for good work -- four Recs were good for one Optime. Pessimies were the opposite. The more Optimies one obtained, the higher one stood in class order.

Miss Cook was our art teacher and she was treated very badly by all of us--we were not too artistic. There was a wonderful artist at Saltus called *Walter Ball* (Dr. Barbara Ball's brother). The Balls lived in an army house near Fort Hamilton and we all played football together with the *Astwoods, Harveys, Collises, and Macbeths*.

One of the boys in my class was *Christopher Henniker-Henton*. His father was Colonial Secretary and went on to be Governor of the Falklands. Christopher was known as "string bean" as he was tall and very thin. He later married Betsy Curtis (Col. Craig Curtis's sister.)

Arthur Motyer lived across the canal. I can still see him crossing the canal, climbing the fence and coming over the field each school day. It was a nuisance when the football or cricket ball was hit in or over the canal.

Alan Barnes came to school by train from St. George's each day. A big adventure was being asked to spend the weekend with the Barnes family in St. George's, particularly going to their church which was Methodist while I was Anglican.

Another weekend was spent with *Buddy Cooper*– what an adventure! We used to fish off the rocks with dough balls flavored with tinned salmon. There was a stretch of rocks between what is now Marine & Ports and No. 7 Shed where there was a small morgue for bodies of drowning victims. Our curiosity was finally rewarded when we saw a body being brought up to the road in a wicker basket.

Sports Day at Saltus was a big occasion. One event was to take everyone's shoes, separate them and spread them all over the football pitch. At the whistle, we would run and search for our shoes. The first to get them on and back to the line won the cup. *David Skinner* was pretty fast in the 100-yard race. *Bill Brewer* and *Bill Cox* were also good athletes. We also had an annual boxing competition – everyone had to box. I can see my brother with a bloody face as he faced *Stanley Evans* who found Peter's nose with a well-placed punch.

Saltus field was also used for ceremonial parades. I remember the Navy pulling guns onto the field and performing various maneuvers. Bernard Park did not exist and Prospect Field was quite small, so our field was the only suitable locale.

After school, our pleasures were simple. We would gather at some point in Fairylands, Point Shares or Cavendish Heights and play Cowboys and Indians. We would have rock fights with boys from other schools on Happy Valley Road, or make bamboo pipes and smoke cedar bark back of Devonshire Marsh on what is now Ocean View. In the summer, we would take a sandwich and cycle over to Elbow beach and play all day. We did not have much in the way of toys. Clothes were passed down as we grew out of them. My mother knitted all my socks and sweaters.

One day a Dutch tug arrived having crossed the Atlantic to escape the Germans. It was the largest ocean going tug at that time. On the way over, they had rescued a monkey found floating on a piece of wreckage. The tug was tied up at the flagpole but the monkey did not like little boys and would bite any who approached it!

American servicemen were everywhere. They had jeeps and trucks and seemed to be camped all over. They leveled the cliffs at Southlands and set up anti-aircraft guns that fired every day at targets towed by small planes. There were army tents on Castle Harbour golf course. The American sailors did not have rum on board ship like the British so when they came ashore, alcohol came as a shock to their system! In Hamilton, the Shore Patrol would chase the troublemakers and whack them with their paddy sticks. The sailors used to rent pedal cycles and pursue any female they saw. We often watched some young woman pedaling like crazy being pursued by a dozen sailors on rented bikes. Campbell Wilkinson (a wonderful horseman) had a horse rental business – he would ride from Smith's Parish each day with 5 or 6 horses, rent them to sailors who would head out of town and, in some cases, be thrown off, whereupon, the horse would immediately return to be rented out again.

Many convoys collected in Bermuda before crossing to Europe so one could always see dozens of ships at anchor in Grassy Bay or Murray's Anchorage. The Dockyard employed hundreds of men who would arrive by ferry every morning.

The *Burlands* built wooden motor torpedo boats and motor launches on the waterfront in front of the Bermudiana. They had a fine reputation for boat building. John's father was a WWI veteran of small torpedo boats.

All this came to an end when I went off to boarding school in England at the end of 1943. I crossed the Atlantic on a frigate, the *HMS Caicos*, with the *Nankivell* twins. The journey took 3 or 4 weeks. We slept in hammocks in the surgery. We first went to Newfoundland where we picked up a large convoy of 80 ships which we were escorting through the U boat packs. It was at times exciting, at times boring, and very rough. I was quite seasick. One day, I was feeling better and went to lunch. I was seated next to the captain. He ordered soup for me, which I ate but the next minute the ship rolled and my soup came back on the plate – very embarrassing! The sailors did not like the ship as it was welded in the U.S.A. and they had always sailed on riveted ships. They thought it would open like a tin can in the stormy seas – it bent a bit but that was all!

When I arrived at my school, the housemaster said I should not have come without passing the "Common Entrance Exam". I told him I had just crossed the Atlantic in a warship through U boat packs and did he expect me to go home – he let me in. That term we were subjected to attacks by the V bomb which was a pilotless plane nicknamed "Doodlebug" – it was fine as long as you could hear the engine, since when the engine cut out, the bomb would come down.

I did not return to Bermuda until 1947. We flew on a converted bomber flown by British South American Airways. The trip took nearly two days since we flew via Lisbon and the Azores.