

Kenneth Grahame summed it up perfectly in *Wind in the Willows*, when Ratty explained to Moley “*there is absolutely nothing, half as much worth doing as simply messing about in boats.*” Be it a sailing cargo ship up the Amazon, a submarine under the Arctic ice, skippering in the Sydney to Hobart, or cruising the world with Jan, Ed Beckett has done the lot.

Most of his first couple of years of life were, however, spent under the dining room table, the only place in the house deemed safe enough while Herr Hitler tried to wipe out the Port of Liverpool. Father was in the Merchant Navy, paying fleeting visits home. Mother finally decided she'd had enough of Adolf and his bombs, so they moved to Holy Island, off Anglesey Island, on the west coast of Wales.



They lived in the idyllic seaside village of Trearddur Bay, 200 metres from a sandy beach and the Irish Sea. Some 300 metres in the other direction lay the waters separating the two islands. Young Ed and his siblings called this the ‘Inland Sea’ and took to it like ducks to water. Ed sailed dinghies across the expanse and enterprisingly charted the lot, named bays, points and islands and took depth soundings, creating a chart of the whole area.

He attended what was then called Holyhead Grammar. Ed wanted to follow his father's career, so he was enrolled in the Merchant Navy College *HMS Conway*, which had been a 19th-century wooden sailing ship in the Menai Strait, separating Anglesey from the mainland. Ed's timing was a bit out, as that same year the historic vessel ran aground and was wrecked while being towed for a refit. By the time he started, the college continued as *HMS Conway*, but consisted instead of Nissan huts.

It was a world of regimentation, right down to the initiation ceremonies. Hung on the *Rangitata* dormitory wall was a painting of that NZ passenger liner. When laid on the floor, new recruits had to kneel and kiss the painting, while their seniors walloped them on the bottom.

At the age of 17 Ed left the walloppers behind to join the same shipping line as his father, as an officer cadet crewing cargo vessels around Bombay, Cochin, Sri Lanka, Madras and Calcutta. At one stage they loaded grain in Canada, building the stabilising shipping boards in two days, loading the 15,000-ton cargo in one. Back in Calcutta, six four-person teams off-loaded the grain, carefully sewing it into sacks, working 24 hours a day for six weeks.

He joined a refrigerated shipping company sailing between Buenos Aires and Montevideo, loading chilled beef to be raced back to London. As a member of the Royal Navy Reserve he then spent five months training in anti submarine, biological and chemical warfare,. At 21, Ed was the lowest form of naval life, a Probationary Acting Sub Lieutenant.

Then fate took a turn and made him Third Officer on a NZ shipping company's vessel, the very same *Rangitata*. No indignities this time. As they had first-class passengers, along with third class and cargo, officers had to don naval uniforms to dazzle them in the evening. Outward journeys carried migrants bound for Wellington, homeward they were mostly New Zealanders off to discover England and Europe.

Then came nine months of submarine training before his vessel took part in exercises from Londonderry to Portsmouth, in the Channel and the Atlantic. They finally journeyed with another sub up to the Arctic, travelling along for a couple of hundred miles under the ice, conducting



experiments on transmission of sound under cold water. You had to surface in order to recharge the batteries, watching for a welcoming hole in the ice.

Aged 24, Ed became Second Officer on the *MV Vamos* running between New York and the Amazon. Their route included the Windward islands, Martinique, Saint Lucia, Grenada, Dominica, Trinidad and Tobago. In Ed's half a dozen trips they carried a few passengers - often missionary families - backwards and forwards between New



York and Belém, going 400 or 500 miles up the Amazon, mainly loading plywood. On one occasion they loaded a cargo of pitch from a lake in Trinidad, and carried it well over 2500 km up the river from Belém to Iquitos in Peru.

At sea, Ed was watch keeper and navigator (no Sat Nav in those days — you'd swing your sextant towards the noonday sun) and also the meteorological officer, often also in charge of cargo stowage - which sounds a little simpler than it actually was. Cargo on one side of the ship could be destined for and had to be accessible for six different ports, and able to be unloaded without capsizing everything else.

He travelled all around the world, but rarely saw areas beyond the ports, and his boyhood idealism of a seaman's life soon disintegrated as he observed the disjointed lives led far away from families. Determined not to be caught in the same trap, in 1964 Ed switched careers radically to work as a trainee manager with Littlewoods General Stores, a Marks & Spencer wannabe.

After a few years around Wrexham, Manchester, Glasgow and Edinburgh he was enticed to come to Australia to work for Walton's. Coming out in 1968 as a £10 Pom (Walton's generously refunded the tenner), Ed, his first wife, daughter and baby son landed in Sydney. Retail in Australia was like a breath of fresh air, compared to England's stiff and stilted industry. Their first posting was to Canberra where Ed soon became manager. In 1975 he transferred back to Sydney, settling at Davidson, with Dee Why for beaching.

After six years of enduring a 3-hour daily commute in Sydney traffic, Ed took his wife and now three children back to Canberra. Another career change saw him invest in a naval consultancy, headed by two naval commanders, one an architect and one an electrical engineer, specialising in

assisting businesses to tender for government contracts, representing the sorts of companies that seek to build Australia's submarines or frigates. The only problem was that the two principals detested each other. So one left, Ed bought out his share and eventually the other followed suit. The most viable component was their printing arm, which Ed developed to become a very successful enterprise.

In the 1980s he joined a yacht syndicate which raced *Nadia IV* and soon had Ed sailing it back from Hobart and racing it in the Gosford to Lord Howe. He later organised another syndicate for *Portobello*, an Adams Naut 40', and participated in three Sydney to Hobart races, first as a crew member, then navigator then skipper.

His first marriage over, in 1994 Ed met Jan, who ran the Australian Business Chamber in the A.C.T. and Southern Tablelands. Ed chaired one of the top printing industry bodies. He finally sold the printing business in 1998 and put a deposit on a house in Noosa Springs, having come here first in 1996 with Jan. After much debate they decided Noosa was the place to retire and arrived in 2000.

Ed had been playing Bridge since childhood and he and Jan joined our Bridge Club in 2002. When then President Colin Regan wanted to retire, he talked Ed into the job, which he held from 2005-2008. They now live close to the Noosaville riverfront. Both have grown up families and grandchildren, love life and love Noosa. Messing around in boats still happens, but these days it's with his beloved Jan, on the decks of an ocean cruise liner.



by Susie Osmaston