

This article covers the life of Walter Toy, who, after many other adventures, wound up in the 16th Company of the 20th Engineers at the age of 54 years. Information is from the website of The HMS Ganges Association, a group dedicated to maintaining contact with persons associated with the training ship by the name.  
(<http://www.hmsgangesassoc.org/waltertoy.htm>)

### The Life of a 19th Century Ganges Boy



Walter Toy was born on the 1st January 1863 in Budock, only a few miles from the port of Falmouth in Cornwall. His father was a farm laborer, his mother a laundress and he was the fourth of seven children and the second son.

After he left school, Walter would only have had about three choices of what to do with his life - to follow his father and work on the land, the hard grind of working in the tin mines, or going to sea. His elder brother by five years, Charles, had already entered the Royal Navy and was a Signaller 2nd Class aboard H.M.S. "Warrior".

No doubt Walter worked with his father for a time, but with the example of his brother, and being of age to join the Navy as a Boy, he knew what he wanted to do.

The local papers carried advertisements asking boys of 15 to 16 and a half years of age to volunteer for the Royal Navy and they should apply to the Commanding Officer of H.M.S. "Ganges", a boys training ship, then moored in St Just Pool at Mylor, a short distance from Falmouth.

Walter would have travelled to Mylor, via Penryn, and on applying would have undergone a medical examination and proved that he could read and write before being accepted.

A few years earlier, a report by the staff surgeon for training ships stated that about a quarter of the boys coming forward were rejected for various reasons, the majority because of poor health, others because they were unable to pass the educational test.

Walter had no trouble on this account and on the 21st September 1878, entered the Royal Navy as a Boy 2nd Class aboard H.M.S. "Ganges", having signed that he would serve for 10 years from the 1st January 1881 when he would be 18 years old. He was described on his Service Document as being 5ft. 1in. with brown hair, blue eyes and a fresh complexion.

He now entered a life so completely different to that he had known before. Subjected to the confines of the ship most of the time, surrounded by hundreds of lads of similar age, being instructed in seamanship and gunnery and even going back to the schoolroom. Over all, there was a strict discipline and swift punishment, but he would be taught to take care of himself and was even paid 6d. a week.

Different yes, but was it any worse than the life he had led up until then? His father, a farm laborer with a wife and six children to provide for, his mother and eldest sister taking in washing and he himself probably working from dawn to dusk in the fields and then probably having to sleep with the other children. Onboard the "Ganges", he was fed regularly, more clothes than he had ever had before in his life and had his own hammock to sleep in. Life was hard, but he thrived on it. His first report in December 1878 was a 'Very Good'; he was then rated Boy 1st Class on the 17th December 1879 and received an 'Excellent' report on the 31st March 1880.

Being a local boy, he had no trouble travelling home for the three long leaves that were granted annually, perhaps he even made it on Sundays; whatever, Walter Toy enjoyed and made the most of his training aboard the "Ganges".

He finally left the ship on 29th May and was sent to the "Impregnable", another boys training ship stationed in Devonport to await a draft to a Fleet ship. He joined H.M.S. "Wye" on the 12th August for just 5 weeks to be transported to his first ship proper H.M.S. "Garnet", a single screw ship of 2,154 tons, 3 masted, carrying a full suit of sails and which mounted 12 - 64pdr. muzzle loaded guns. She was the guard ship on the South American Station and whilst onboard her, Walter was rated Ordinary Seaman 2nd Class on 1st January 1881, his 18th birthday, and then O.D. on the 29th November that year. By the 7th September of the following year he was back in Devonport and on board the "Royal Adelaide", a receiving and accommodation ship. Whilst in the "Garnet" his reports were 'Good' throughout and he was obviously carrying out his duties as required.

His next draft, on the 20th December, was to H.M.S. "Thalia", a screw corvette that was launched in 1869, it was the last vessel to be built in the Woolwich Yard on the River Thames. Once again he was only on board for a short period, 2 and a half months, being transported again to his next ship which was in the Far East. On the 1st February 1883 he was rated Able Seaman and at 20 years of age entitled to draw his rum ration. His conduct whilst aboard her was described as 'Very Good'. On arrival out in the Far East on the 17th March 1883 he was transferred to H.M.S. "Curacoa"; a cruiser built in 1874 and of some 2,400 tons.

Up to this point Walter appears to have been a competent and obedient seaman, being rated on due dates and of good character, but now things started to go all wrong for him. No clue is given on his papers as to why but on the 31st July he was put in the cells for 14 days and then just 9 weeks later, on the 8th October 1883, was sentenced to 12 months imprisonment with hard labor.

We can only speculate as to what had happened. Had he fallen foul of some senior rate or officer on the "Curacoa" or had he become addicted to his rum, which he had not long received, and in a drunken state struck his superior officer? We cannot tell, but he was transferred to H.M.S. "Audacious" for confinement, the fleet at that time were 'showing the flag' around various Japanese ports until the ships returned to Hong Kong. Here Walter was discharged to H.M.S. "Victor Emanuel", then not only the receiving and accommodation ship for the Dockyard but also a prison. He was no doubt employed in helping to build the dockyard during his time in Hong Kong. Around about June or July of the following year he was shipped back to the UK, still serving his sentence.

On arrival in Portsmouth, he had three weeks of his sentence remitted, so he was released and discharged to the "Duke of Wellington", a receiving and accommodation ship alongside in Portsmouth on the 17th September. His next draft was on the 14th October to H.M.S. "Sultan", a battleship built in 1870 and of some 9,500 tons. Her main armaments of 8 10-inch guns were contained in an armored central battery on each beam; the vices and virtues of gun turrets had yet to be fully explored. It was not long however, before Walter was in trouble again, spending 7 days in cells from the 27th February 1885, 14 days cells from 5th April and another 14 days on the 8th September. He was of course, on 2nd Class for Conduct after his spell in prison, and this leads one to wonder whether drink was his problem, and that he made the most of his one day per month statutory leave. He was back in Portsmouth and onboard the "Duke of Wellington" on the 23rd January 1886.

It was around this time that the conditions onboard the depot ships and the corruption practised by the senior rates and ships police, was causing much discontent and insubordination among the ratings awaiting fleet service.

For instance, the Master-at-Arms demanded 10 shillings for an extra 7-day leave pass; the Captain of the Hold expected to be dropped half a crown for stowing a ratings kit and the Clothing Crusher, for the matter of 2 shillings, would sign a uniform kit list.

The drafting masters-at arms could, for the deposit of 10 shillings arrange a draft ashore for married men, who would remain in that billet providing they could continue paying for the privilege. This was at a time when an A.B's pay was only 1s 7d per day, so it was no wonder that there was discontent onboard.

This led the Commander-in-Chief to eventually order an investigation and to tighten up the discipline on the ship, so a Captain Robert Woodward, an officer of the old school whose unorthodox methods of dealing with recalcitrant seamen were well known, was appointed to the ship. He speedily obtained approval from the Admiralty to discharge ashore a number of 'insubordinate and worthless characters' as 'objectionable'.

Walter meanwhile, had only been on board three weeks when he was sentenced to 90 days imprisonment with hard labor on the 14th February for some unknown offence. He was then considered to be one of Woodward's 'characters' and was discharged from the Royal Navy

as 'objectionable' on the 18th February. He was detained on board the "Duke" until the 28th February when he was then transferred to Lewes Naval Prison in Sussex to serve out the remainder of his sentence.

After his release sometime in May 1886, Walter was finished with the Royal Navy but not yet with the sea. He obtained berths in merchant ships and for the next two years sailed to ports in South America and in the Far East.

He finally left the sea when he jumped ship sometime in October 1888 in Astoria, Oregon on the West Coast of America, and moving north and inland, settled in an area called Ainslie near Winlock, Lewis County in Washington.

The following year, he married Sarah Snow on 12th November and they moved into Winlock where Walter set up a successful business as a blacksmith. Sarah's ancestors could be traced back to a Nicolas Snow who embarked in the "Anne" in 1623 and married a passenger who went over in the "Mayflower". Walter and Sarah lived in Winlock all their married life and had nine children, eight surviving to adulthood and he later became a citizen of the United States on the 2nd July 1900.

Walter's adventures were not yet finished. The United States entered the Great War against Germany on the 6th April 1917 and although he was then 54 years old, managed to convince the recruiting officers, after five attempts, that he was young enough to serve. He enlisted on the 13th December and was assigned to the 16th Company 20th Engineers of the United States Army. Training must have been the minimum because on the 24th January 1918 he is on a British troopship S.S "Tuscania" with 2,300 other men sailing from Hoboken, New Jersey for Le Havre in France.

The ship was to travel in convoy via Halifax with two destroyers as escort and after 12 days at sea were met by a further 8 British destroyers West of Ireland. The convoy's course was to the North of Ireland and to pass between Rathlin Island, 3 miles off the North Irish coast and the Mull of Kintyre, the North Channel at this point being approximately 12 and a half miles wide, into the Irish Sea. As the "Tuscania" passed by Rathlin Island about 7 miles off, she was struck by one of the two torpedoes fired by U-Boat 77, commanded by Lt. Cmdr. W. Meyer, at 1741 on the 5th February.

The ship carried sufficient lifesaving capacity but with only 250 crew the soldiers had to do the best they could; some managed to get boats away and landed on Rathlin, others on Kintyre and some on the Isle of Islay away to the North. The majority however, were picked up by the destroyers coming alongside the ship and embarking them straight inboard. Of the 2,550 souls onboard the ship, only 116 people were lost, mainly because she took just over 5 hours to sink.

It is not known how Walter escaped, but no doubt he used his early training as a Ganges Boy to assist himself and others to survive as his granddaughter remembers him describing how he "helped many a boy to safety".

After the rescue, he went on to serve in France until 14th May 1919 when he sailed for home and his subsequent discharge from the Army on the 12th June.

He returned to Winlock and by 1921 was the Commander of the Buford Rockefeller Post of the American Legion.

Walter died of a cerebral hemorrhage on 22nd October 1926, aged 64, and he was buried with full military honors, a firing party with a last salute and a bugler sounding the Last Post. Here was a Ganges Boy of the 19th century, being honored for his services to another nation in the 20th century.



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