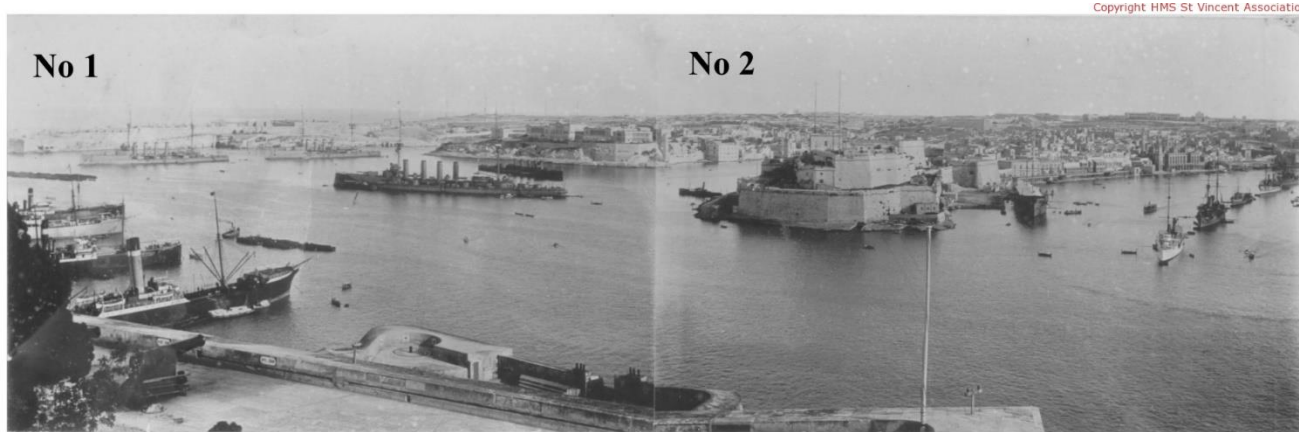


# COMMANDER E H R WALKER

## and the Royal Navy of his time

Paul Flint

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Malta 1927-1929 (from <https://www.hmsstvinassociation.co.uk/1920-1929/>)

***It is upon the Navy, that under the good providence of God, the Wealth,  
Prosperity and Peace of these islands and Empire do mainly depend.***

**Articles of War**

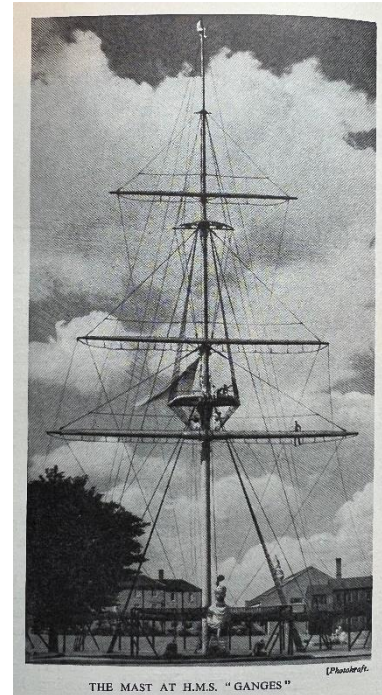
***Grab a chance and you won't be sorry for a might-have-been.***

**Ted Walker**

Throughout his Swallows and Amazons series, Arthur Ransome draws attention to the Royal Navy by developing the character of the father of the Walker children, as a naval officer. Ted Walker plays a largely absent, but critical role. Although Mrs Walker establishes the limits of the freedom enjoyed by the Swallows, Ted Walker's now legendary telegram was the catalyst that permitted the children to camp on Wild Cat Island: **BETTER DROWNED THAN DUFFERS IF NOT DUFFERS WONT DROWN**. This, it turned out, was crucial to them meeting the Amazons and to their future adventures. He is idolised and emulated by his eldest son, John, and often quoted by the Walker children, particularly in times of need.

The first scene in which Ted Walker appears in person is on the deck of a passenger ship in Flushing harbour, about to sail for Harwich. Ransome's illustration depicts him at the moment he sees *Goblin*, crewed by the Swallows, who had crossed the North Sea. During *Swallows and Amazons* Ted Walker was on a destroyer in Malta, under orders to sail for Hong Kong. Two years later, in 1932 (given the disparity of dates in *Swallowdale*), in *We didn't mean to go to Sea*, he was in the process of returning overland to Britain from the Chinese coast to take up a new appointment at Shotley, near Harwich.

We are told Ted Walker's rank and, by inference, an indication of his age. He is referred to as both commander and, in *Secret Water*, unexpectedly and intermittently as captain. As a commander this would put him typically in his mid-30s to early 40s. His appointment at Shotley would have been to *HMS Ganges*, the ratings' training establishment (1905-76). Walker must have been fairly senior (probably by then on the cusp of being promoted to captain), for the smug sub-lieutenant to collect him by car; and his forthcoming arrival was known to the customs officers from Harwich who boarded *Goblin* on its return from Flushing. As Ransome used the term captain it would not be unreasonable to assume that Walker was becoming the captain of *HMS Ganges*. As Commanding Officer of the training establishment he would have been a seaman officer, in the Executive Branch, and not an Engineer or Paymaster. Although there is no longer a naval presence at Shotley, and the site is destined to become a housing estate, the tall mast up which the trainees had to climb, can still be seen, albeit as a listed structure in a dire state of repair (it was dismantled in May 2022 to be refurbished).



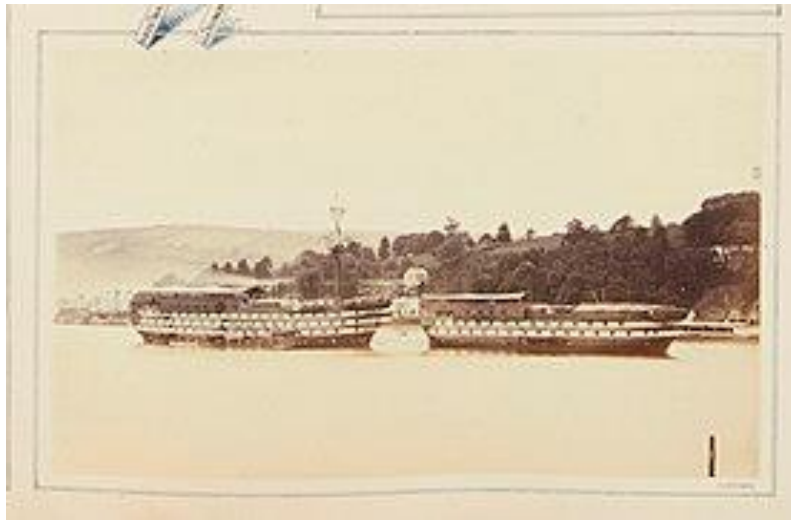
In reality, a Ted Walker never commanded *HMS Ganges*, but Ransome's friend Captain Eric Reid Corson (1887-1972) did do so. According to Roger Wardale, Ransome knew Corson at school, and he and his two sons were avid readers of Ransome's books. Hugh Brogan mentions that Captain Corson had a cutter called *Wild Cat* and a tender called *Titmouse*, and sailed with Ransome during the period leading up to the Second World War. *We Didn't Mean to go to Sea* was published in 1937 and *Secret Water* in 1939. It is easy to see Captain Corson's command of *HMS Ganges* 1937-39 being an inspiration for Ted Walker's appointment to the same place and position. During this period the Commanding Officers of Shotley Training Establishment (*HMS Ganges*) were:

1935-37 Captain C O Alexander  
1937-39 Captain F R Corson MVO DSC  
1939-40 Captain F W H Goolden

As Ted Walker's naval career progressed, he married and he and his wife, Mary, started a family. At this time, whilst officers were not forbidden to marry before the age of 25, it was probably unusual to do so. From 1938 Officer's Marriage Allowance became available from age 25 and most officers were probably not sufficiently well off to marry younger than this. If one assumes that John was born when his father was aged 25 then, by 1930 with John aged 12, Ted Walker must have been at least 37, and therefore born no later than 1893. Due to his apparent RN status it is likely that he was a little older, perhaps 43-45, in 1932, suggesting he was born in 1887-89. Coincidentally, Ernest Altounyan, referred to below, was born in November 1889. Ted Walker would have joined the Royal Navy at 13 as a cadet, in about 1902-04.

At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century officers did, as now, begin their training at Dartmouth in Devon. The difference is that Ted Walker may have been one of the last intakes into the predecessor of the present college. The fifth *HMS Britannia* (built in 1860 as the *Prince of Wales*) was a wooden three-decker sailing ship, stripped of its masts, and moored in the River Dart. It had been towed there for

this purpose in 1869 to be away from the corrupting influences of operational naval bases, first at Portsmouth and then Portland. *Britannia* was joined the following year by another ship-of-the-line, the two-decker *HMS Hindostan* (1841). The two vessels were linked by a covered gangway.



*HMS Britannia (left) and Hindostan in Dartmouth, c.1878*  
(Image from Wikimedia Commons)

Work commenced on the present college in 1901 and was completed in 1905. At that time 300-400 cadets would have been under training, having entered at the age of 13. Ted Walker may have commenced his training in the ships and completed it in the new shore establishment, where officers are still trained, albeit they would now be at least age 17 on entry and may even be in their early 40s, depending on their specialisation.

Ted Walker would rightly have regarded himself as a member of a technologically advanced navy and, at that time, the most powerful in the world. Apart from his first period of training, in a ship in which Nelson would almost have been at home, he would have served in warships powered solely by engines and fitted with gun turrets and torpedo tubes. But those with whom he served, who had been in the RN much longer, would still in Ted Walker's early days have recalled fully rigged sailing vessels. Most of these would have been semi-redundant, but fully rigged, three-masted ships-of-the-line, with engines, were being constructed until the early 1860s.

HMS Warrior, the world's first all iron warship and with steam power as its main propulsion, was launched in 1860. It revolutionised naval ship design, as did the development of gun turrets and gun turrets a year or so later. Breach loading guns with rifled barrels soon replaced Nelson-style muzzle-loaders. The experimental use of steam propulsion dated as far back as the 1820s and 30s, and the first screw frigate was ordered in 1844. Although HMS Devastation, in 1873, was the first major RN warship to rely entirely on steam propulsion, some warships with masts survived into the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Oil-fired engines appeared early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as did submarines. Holland class of submarine, of American origin, made their debut in Britain in 1901. In 1906 the battleship HMS Dreadnought was launched and, at a stroke, made all other battleships obsolete, with armour up to 11" thick, ten 12" guns (six could fire ahead, six astern, and eight on a broadside), and steam turbines. Ted Walker had indeed joined a powerful and innovative navy, and one which all too soon would be fully committed in the First World War – the Royal Navy's first major war since 1815. Of passing interest is the fact that the first action between British and German warships at sea involved a force of destroyers based at Harwich.



The Mighty Armada at Spithead for the Coronation Review June 24th 1911.  
*Stephen Cribb Photo*

*Southsea.*

By the outbreak of war in 1914 Ted Walker may have been aged approximately 25 years, a lieutenant, and very probably at sea. As a junior seaman officer he would have spent most of his time in ships, watch-keeping and possibly specialising in a skill such as gunnery or navigation. Perhaps he was involved in countering the U-boat threat, which almost crippled Britain, or he may have played a part at the Battle of Jutland in 1916. During this period Ted Walker would have witnessed not only the potency of submarine warfare for the first time, but also the inception of the Fleet Air Arm and the first use of aircraft against and from ships.



*Sailing near HMS Rodney/Nelson*

The inter-war years, when Ransome was writing his novels for children, were a difficult time for the Royal Navy. It was a period during which defence treaties resulted in considerable cuts in manpower and ships ('Geddes Axe' being one such exercise), wage reductions and the Invergordon Mutiny. In 1931 the catalyst for mutiny was an across-the-board cut of one shilling a day for all RN personnel, from Admirals to Ordinary Seamen. Pay for the latter was 4/- a day and represented a cut of 25% for those men. If Ted Walker took command of HMS Ganges in 1932, his task would not have been easy. Some new ships appeared, notably the battlecruiser *HMS Hood* in 1920, and *HMS Rodney* and *HMS Nelson* in 1927. These latter were Britain's most powerful battleships to date and the only ones in the Royal Navy to have 16" guns. Their shells each weighed 2,461 lbs, almost three times as heavy as those in the Dreadnought and a considerable contrast with a complete broadside from Nelson's *HMS Victory*, which weighed 1,142lb.

By 1939, some seven years after joining *HMS Ganges*, Ted Walker would have been a very senior Captain or, indeed, might have reached flag rank (eg Rear Admiral). If so, he may not have seen active service at sea in WW2. A real-life Walker, Captain F J 'Johnny' Walker CB DSO (3 bars), commanded the destroyer *HMS Starling* and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Support Squadron. He was described as the greatest U-boat killer and died of overstrain in July 1944 age 47. Under normal circumstances Ted Walker would have retired from RN service by 1945, in his mid-50s.

Ted Walker is a shadowy figure. He appears in two books, and in spirit in several more, always with a metaphorical or actual hand on the tiller, gently controlling and steering his family. Although Ransome's own knowledge of the Royal Navy may have been a little sketchy at times, for example muddling the ranks of commander and captain, Ted Walker's telegram in *Swallows and Amazons* is typical of the style of communication used by naval officers: short, pithy and witty, as is often the case between warships. In a post-war exchange of signals between an American and a British warship, the former is understood to have asked what it felt like to be in the second largest navy. The Royal Navy responded by asking what it was like to be in the second best.

According to Christina Hardyment, the Altounyan family considered the 'duffers' telegram to be exactly in the style of Ernest Altounyan, he being a frequent sender of terse and witty telegrams. It is perhaps not entirely coincidental that *Peter Duck* contains a dedication to Mrs E H R Walker (ie Mrs Edward Walker), and that Ernest Altounyan, father of the prototype Swallows, shares the same initials.

I discovered to my cost that my one and only telegram was just a bit too succinct. When I learned that I would be accepted into the Royal Navy in 1980 my mother was in Germany and father in South Africa. I telegrammed both with the cryptic message "CPFRN". My mother, remembering my initials and knowing my ambition, guessed my news immediately. My father, however, could not understand its meaning; and his employer, the Department of Health, failed to obtain further clarification from me, as I was an impoverished student and did not want to fund a further message. Much puzzled, my father only found out what it meant after returning to the UK. I can't help feeling that Ted Walker would have been quicker on the uptake had John had sent him a similar communication!

John did not join the Royal Navy via Dartmouth at the normal entry age then of 13 or 14 years, but may have done so as a Special Entry cadet at 17½. If he did not join as a career officer, then no doubt he and Roger would have volunteered at the outbreak of the Second World War, and perhaps the Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS) would have attracted Susan and Titty and the Blckett girls. The WRNS reformed permanently in 1939, following a first period of service 1917-19, and was integrated fully into the Royal Navy in 1993, following a decision in 1990 that women would serve at sea alongside their male counterparts.

Ted Walker had a more obvious influence on John than on any other of his children. At Falmouth he taught John the essentials of sailing, which enabled the Walker children to sail *Swallow* and to succeed in crossing the North Sea in *Goblin*. In his book '*Approaching Arthur Ransome*', Peter Hunt considers that John saw himself as a stand-in for his absentee father, and that Commander Walker passed this role on to his son in the famous telegram. This pragmatism and sense of personal responsibility infuses the series of books. Throughout them, John is under the shadow of his father and tries hard to emulate him. He rows navy stroke so that the oars do not splash, carries his father's books and quotes him in times of need.

*We Didn't mean to go to Sea* is a favourite book with many people, and one in which the Walker children mature and are defined most realistically. There is little room in the story for the children to

focus on anything other than their personal predicament and so it is much more matter-of-fact account. Throughout the book Ted Walker is quoted frequently and when he appears in person he shows remarkable presence and composure, considering his young family had just crossed the North Sea in error in a gale, without assistance from adults. Peter Hunt suggests that this is the moment when John wins his father's approval and he likens this to Arthur Ransome settling accounts with his own father, Cyril Ransome. Arthur was still a boy when Cyril Ransome died, similar in age to John, and was very conscious that he had fallen short of his father's expectations.

*Secret Water* is the only other novel in which Ted Walker appears in person, and contains some of the successful Ted Walker ingredients of the other stories. There are references to witty telegrams and an expedition to uncharted territories, all but naval in character, with a siege-like volume of stores and meticulous preparations. Finally, there is an amusing use of Royal Navy-style Pidgin English when Ted converses with the Eels. In some ways this is a difficult book. The Swallows, who matured in *We Didn't Mean to go to Sea* and moved a step closer towards adulthood and their father's world of responsibility, are uneasy partners with the Amazons and Eels, who provide a more juvenile contrast between adult attitudes and surveying, and teenage games. Like all of the series, the story should not be over-analysed. The books were written for children not for minute dissection by adults.

The submarine-hunting Captain Johnny Walker and the fictitious Ted Walker had no link in Arthur Ransome's mind, but they did share two strong parallels: love of family and of the Royal Navy. At Johnny Walker's funeral in 1944, Admiral Sir Max Horton summed up his contribution: "*May there never be wanting in this realm a succession of men of like spirit in discipline, imagination and valour, humble and unafraid.*" It would be good to think that in the fictitious Walker family some of these values were apparent, and that Ransome's books have helped to nurture the same values amongst those lucky enough to read them.