

A SENTIMENTAL JOURNEY

Back to Wilhelmshaven and Prince Rupert School

by David Skillan

Prince Rupert School in Wilhelmshaven, on Germany's bleak North Sea coast, was a comprehensive, coeducational boarding school founded in 1947 for the sons and daughters of British servicemen based in Germany. I was a pupil there from 1951 until 1956, when I was 12 to 17 years old.

I returned to Wilhelmshaven for a two-day visit in April of 2004, staying at the City Hotel Valois, one of the few hotels in town. An important U-boat base during World War II, Wilhelmshaven is today the German navy's headquarters for its North Sea operations.

The weather was much as I remembered it—overcast and cold, with occasional mist, light rain, and strong winds, but clearing by late afternoon and sunny on both days. During my brief stay I visited the site of Prince Rupert School (best known as PRS) three times in two days. I also walked around the inner harbor on the *Fliegerdeich*, an extensive man-made dyke separating the ocean from the town.

In a quest to recapture some of my lost youth, I first walked past Raleigh House (pictured at right), where I lived with about 100 other 11- to 18-year-old boys, then over the Kaiser Wilhelm Bridge and along the *Bonteheim*. Raleigh House later became Collingwood. All houses—that is, dormitories, or dorms—were named after famous British admirals: Howe, Rodney, Drake, and Collingwood. All except for the main hall, Churchill, which was named after the wartime prime minister.



When I entered the old school site (pictured at lower right) through a gap in the wire fence, memories of sneaking out of bounds came flooding back. I was overcome with nostalgia and sadness for those long-ago, carefree days. I didn't know whether to laugh or cry, so I did a little of both. I walked around the old houses of Howe and Drake, the medical inspection room (better known as "sick bay"), one or two classrooms, and the ominous, huge grey concrete bunkers. Most of the grounds were overgrown with weeds, and the place was deserted and eerily quiet, instead of how it used to be, with hordes of noisy, uniformed boys and girls on their way to lessons and meals.



Every so often during my solitary walks, I stopped to wipe away my tears and stare at sights such as Churchill House, where five days a week the whole school came together for assembly. Accompanied by members of staff, Mr. Pacey, the headmaster, first led the school in prayer, then read out school notices. Indoor gym classes were sometimes held there, not to mention school plays, weekly film shows, and the eagerly awaited end-of-term dances.

Looking across the playing field, I remembered facing Denis Voller of Howe Boys as a cricket player, and more often as a soccer player. Denis played on the right wing, and I played on the left. He was the younger brother of Brian, the first pupil from PRS to be accepted into Cranwell College for RAF pilot training. Denis met and courted my sister Janice at PRS. After they left school, they corresponded for a few years before getting married.

It was at PRS that, thanks to compulsory sports in all weather—sun, wind, rain, sleet, hail, and snow—I developed a liking for long-distance running. When my fellow runners fell by the wayside, too exhausted to go on, or simply gave up after they'd had enough, I found to my surprise that I could keep going, drawing on stamina I didn't know I had. It was an attribute that would often stand me in good stead later. I also learned first-hand the great satisfaction that comes with perseverance. In those days I had the physique of an athlete, wiry and wafer-thin.

After walking across the Causeway, which is now a properly surfaced road instead of what was then a rubble track to the *Fliegerdeich*, I gazed through the wire mesh at my former home of Collingwood, which housed so many memories. As a teenager, I was caned more than once (with “six of the best,” a caning of six strokes on either the hand or the backside) by Mr. Monger for talking after lights out or some other misdemeanour. Turning around, I looked over Jade Bay to the lighthouse, remembering how the bay was often covered with ice during the freezing winters.



Leaving the *Fliegerdiech*, I strolled across the Kaiser Wilhelm Bridge (above), past the modern apartment buildings and the nautical museum into which Howe and Rodney Boys' Houses have been converted. Then I looked across at the old Yacht Club, which the school shared with RAF Jever, where I spent most of my free time in summer, and where the Sea Cadets practised their rowing skills in an old cutter.

Returning to the main site, I stood where the school trains, complete with the Puffing Billy steam engine, pulled up at the beginning and end of every term. Memories of hundreds of pupils together with a few harassed-looking teachers came back to me, as I pictured a lot of hugging and kissing, tear-streaked faces, and shouts of “Have a great holiday!” and “See you next term!” As the train pulled away, everyone burst into song with the familiar refrain “So Long, It's Been Good to Know You!” My home was then in Berlin, a distance of about 300 miles.

My return to Wilhelmshaven brought back thoughts of fellow pupils and members of staff, such as Mr. Pacey, Mr. Monger (housemaster and French teacher), Mr. Robertson (maths, sailing master, and head of the combined cadet force), Mr. Robinson (metalwork and technical drawing), Mr. Yelland (piano and music), and Herr Hesse (sports), and of course the German matron of Collingwood House, whose name I now forget. No doubt about it, time spent at PRS was memorable for many. And without question there was a tremendous school spirit, or esprit de corps.



When the school first opened, boys and girls shared the same houses, with the boys downstairs and the girls upstairs. After one or two adventurous youths were caught climbing up the drainpipes and into girls' bedrooms—which resulted in immediate expulsion—the boys were moved to separate sites, the *Bonteheim* and the *Fliegerdeich*.

Prince Rupert School closed down in Wilhelmshaven in 1972 and moved to the beautiful medieval town of Rinteln, not far from Hamlyn of Pied Piper fame, where it lives on. The Wilhelmshaven Association (<http://www.prs-wilhelmshaven.co.uk/open/index.html>), or TWA, is a very active association of former students, whose members stay in touch with quarterly newsletters (called *The New Cavalier*) and annual meetings throughout the United Kingdom. Former pupils living in such places as Australia, New Zealand, and Canada also organize occasional get-togethers.

Like many others, I had mixed feelings about PRS when I was a pupil. But like military service later, it did me no harm, and perhaps a lot of good. I'm glad I went. I wouldn't have missed it for the world. ➔

