

# From ship to shore for Dennis

IF Dennis Gallagher was to write his memoirs it would probably read like a *Boys' Own* tale of derring-do.

Aged 11 he became a wartime evacuee, as a young man he travelled the world on board some of the finest ships of that era, and during a spell in Cyprus he ended up being detained at gunpoint by Greek-Cypriot terrorists.

Now a grandfather, life for Dennis as marketing manager at Hexham Racecourse, is, thankfully, more sedate.

But he can still vividly recall the time when, as a small boy, he was evacuated from his Newcastle home as the Second World War raged around him.

Being an industrial hub, Newcastle became a target for the German bombs, so for their safety the city's youngsters were shipped out to the countryside in their thousands.

Dennis said: "I was born in the West End of Newcastle and went to the Royal Grammar School.

"It was 1942, and with the rest of the school I was evacuated to Penrith.

"We were separated into billets and I was with two other boys from the school.

"I was only away for about a year, but at the place we were sent to we were given just a room with a bed and a chair; that was all we had.

"Although there were visits from family, it just wasn't what I was used to and it was quite a scary time for a young child."

Once back in Newcastle, Dennis finished his schooling before training as a Merchant Navy officer at the Royal Naval Training College in Kent.

On passing out he joined the Cunard White Star Line as a navigating cadet - a posting that saw him serve on board passenger vessels and cargo ships for the next 11 years.

Among those ships was the *Georgic*, the last vessel built for the White Star Line before its merger with the Cunard Line in

1934.

Once a prominent British shipping company, the White Star Line of Boston Packet - to give it its full title - is best known for its ill-fated luxury flagship, the *Titanic*.

Dennis said: "I served on board many of Cunard's ships, and quite frequently on the Southampton to New York route.

"But I also spent a lot of time travelling the world - which was exactly what I signed up for - and travelled to the Mediterranean, the United States, Canada and the Far East.

"In fact the *Georgic* was used as a troop ship to take troops to the Korean War."

It was on the way back from Israel that Dennis had one of the most frightening experiences of his career.

He developed appendicitis and his condition became so acute that he was sent ashore at Limassol in Cyprus for treatment. Complications meant that he ended up spending 14 weeks in hospital, but it was when he was discharged that he really ran into trouble.

"I was looked after by a sponsor that the company had organised to ensure I had everything I needed while I was stuck there," said Dennis.

"But when it came to the point that I was able to be discharged from hospital, I was told I was to meet a ship on the other side of the island."

And it was during that gruelling 70-mile bus journey to join his ship that Dennis became the target of EOKA terrorists who boarded the bus, brandishing sawn-off shotguns.

At the time, international relations between Turkey and Greece were at breaking point over Turkey's occupation of Northern Cyprus and EOKA - Ethniki Organosis Kyprion Agoniston - which is Greek for the National Organisation of Cypriot Fighters, had launched a paramilitary movement on the island.

A desire to see the world as a young man resulted in more than **Dennis Gallagher** bargained for - but he wouldn't had missed a minute of his time with the Cunard Line, or, for that matter, his other careers as physiotherapist, sales director and now racecourse marketing manager, as **GEMMA BROWN** found out.

Dennis said: "Well, of course I must have seemed suspicious to them, because you have to remember I had been dropped ashore with quite a bit of urgency so I could receive treatment. And, although I had my passport, there was nothing recorded on it to say how I had got into the country."

After being interrogated about why he was in Cyprus, Dennis was held overnight while the men checked out his story.

"Needless to say I got quite a fright; I wasn't really sure what was going to happen to me," he recalled.

"I can just remember one of them saying to me, 'would you like a Coca Cola?' as if that was the most important thing on my mind!

"When I eventually got home I was given two months leave to fully recover!"

But despite his ordeal, Dennis

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■ **Staying the course:** Marketing manager of Hexham Racecourse Dennis Gallagher.

Photo: D080612

returned to the job he loved.

He said: "I met some fantastic people with Cunard and some memorable ones! They really were wonderful times."

Among those memorable passengers were some "priests" who, during a trip to New York, managed to fleece scores of passengers at cards!

And it was during his years with Cunard that Dennis married his childhood sweetheart, Joan.

The couple had known each other since Joan was 16, and, when Dennis left Cunard as a senior second officer, they settled in Whitley Bay.

His father's Newcastle-based physiotherapy practice provided Dennis with his next career opportunity.

After retraining in Glasgow, he joined the practice in 1958 as his father's assistant, taking over from him when he retired.

Dennis said: "I went into private practice in Newcastle and had contracts with a lot of the big companies, like Greggs of Gosforth, who were making sure their staff were looked after."

Another of those contracts was with the Royal Ballet whose dancers would call on Dennis if they needed his help when the corps toured the North.

But during the recession of the 1970s many companies were unable to afford such services for their staff, and Dennis had to shut up shop.

However, it wasn't long before a new career opportunity came his way in the form of another family business - leaving Dennis to point out: "Well, they do say that when one door closes, another opens!"

For he went on to join his brother-in-law at South Shields-based Harlow Printing, which continues to thrive today.

"I was sales director and helped establish links with customers in the retail, manufacturing and service sector, as well as several in local government and the NHS," said Dennis.

In April 1997 Dennis decided to retire, but his break from work was short-lived.

He said: "I knew Charles Enderby, the chief executive at Hexham Racecourse, because I have always loved horse racing and was a regular at local point-to-point meets."

Subsequently, in 2004, he was offered the role of marketing manager at the course, responsible for sponsorships, corporate entertaining and event planning.

Today, Dennis can be found handling everything from conferences and seminars to weddings, with the same aplomb he showed as an officer on board Cunard's liners.