

In his own words

By ALAN SHILLUM

I came from a working-class home in east London. The Daily Mirror was my war-widow mum's bible. Cassandra. Marje Proops. The Zecs. All household names. Mum believed in them. She believed in me, too.

But never did she think that one day I'd be working in the paper's newsroom as the News Editor. To be honest, neither did I.

My father, a fireman, was killed in the Blitz. With three young children Mum didn't have an easy time of it. In 1950, at 15, without any qualifications, I set out to become an earner.

I could draw quite well. This landed me an apprenticeship as an engineering draughtsman, with the proviso I went to night school. I ended up with qualifications in English and mechanical engineering – and a dread of wasting the rest of my life in a musty drawing office.

Deferred National Service with the RAF provided thinking time. But it took a film to bring my future into focus: 'Ace in the Hole', featuring Kirk Douglas. At the end of its 112 minutes, despite its cynicism, I'd made up my mind. I wanted to be a newspaperman.

Discharged at 24, I had nothing save an RAF document stating that I would be 'useful to a future employer'. So I went hunting for that employer.

My first port of call, on a Friday afternoon in September 1958, was the Walthamstow Guardian. I asked to see the editor. "About what?" the receptionist asked. "A job as a reporter," I said. "Any experience?" she said. "No," I said.

"Then I'm sorry. You can't have a job without experience, so the editor wouldn't see you even if he were here", she said.

Just then a slim grey-haired man came off the street into the lobby. "What's the matter?" he said. The receptionist explained. The man, who'd obviously enjoyed a drink, stared at me. "I'm the Editor," he said. "Come upstairs".

We talked about my circumstances. Ten minutes it took, and I had a month's trial as a reporter, starting on the Monday. Wage £8 a week. "I'm taking a chance," said the editor. "If you're no good, you're out."

I learned later that Fridays were Rotary days, and that his mood after a meeting could vary. So fate had dealt me a good card. Had he been in a bad mood or I'd dawdled on my walk to the paper's offices I would never have had that chance to be a newspaperman.

The month up, the editor summoned me to his office. Again it was a Friday afternoon after Rotary. "This feature story you have written," he said, holding the copy by thumb and forefinger as if it smelled. "Can you do any better?"

I said: "I don't know. I have tried very hard with it and I have shown it to one or two reporters and they seemed to like it."

"Well," he said. "I like it too, so much so I am going to give you the job and at £2 a week more than agreed. Is it a deal?" It was deal all right.

I was "apprenticed" to an older reporter who taught me the tricks of the trade. He was a good tutor – one of the best, in fact – and I was a quick learner at my new profession.

Before long I was sending five-shilling "nibs" to the Evenings and casualing as a Wednesday night production sub on The NME, which was then printed on the Walthamstow Guardian presses.

Three years later, after getting what was called "a scoop" on a big story, I was invited to do a Friday casual shift by Daily Mirror news editor Roly Watkins and I was on my way.

Roly is one of those who occupies a place on my Pantheon of Heroes, along with another of my mentors, Dan Ferrari. The editor who gave me my first break on that long ago Friday afternoon is up there too, Albert Pittman.

Alongside is the man he "apprenticed" me to: Edward Vale, whom I followed to the Daily Mirror and who became a star reporter, and remained a pal for nigh on 40 years.