

Leading Cadet Will Skinner – My Sea Cadets Journey

Good afternoon Sirs, Ma'ams, Ladies and Gentlemen.

My name is Will Skinner, and I am from TS Itchen, Winchester Sea cadets. First of all, I'd like to say what an honour it is to be here at Trinity House.

When I was asked to speak today, I m going to be honest, I was really scared. But I knew this would be a wonderful opportunity. To be here in this amazing place and meet the members and supporters who make Sea Cadets possible.

And Sea Cadets has helped me with my confidence and taught me to speak in front of people. Not usually this many, but there's a first time for everything.

I joined when I was ten. It wasn't actually my idea. My mum showed me Sea Cadets on her laptop and said, "I think you'd enjoy this." Being ten years old, I thought, "Well, it sounds like I'm doing this then."

Eight years later, I'm very glad she did. What kept me going back wasn't sailing, at first. It was the people. I made friends, I looked up to the older cadets, and I found somewhere I felt I belonged.

When things weren't going brilliantly at school, Sea Cadets was somewhere different, with different friends and something to look forward to. I still remember Mrs Gallimore, who taught me as a junior.

We were learning practical skills, trying new things and earning badges and qualifications. Those early achievements might seem small now, but when you're ten, they're a big deal.

The moment I began to realise how much bigger Sea Cadets could be was when I went aboard TS Royalist for a taster day. I'd never been on such a large sailing ship. Suddenly, I was steering, learning about signals and seeing how the whole ship worked.

I had been used to dinghy sailing and learning knots and drill at my unit... now I was discovering an entirely different world. Later I went aboard TS Jack Petchey for my first residential voyage.

Living with people you've only just met, sharing the work and learning to get along, is a very different experience from going home after a parade night. You make friends remarkably quickly. And you realise Sea Cadets isn't just one unit: it's a whole network of opportunities and people across the Country.

I loved having the chance to go offshore. It gave me independence, challenged me and made me realise that being part of a crew means other people are relying on you. It also made me want to do more

Which brings me to the highlight of my cadet career: being selected to take part in the Tall Ships Races this summer aboard Royalist.

We visited places including Harlingen and Antwerp, met crews from around the world and represented Sea Cadets on an international stage. Even now, it feels extraordinary to say that I was part of an international sailing race.

One of the most memorable moments came in Antwerp. Our crew received prizes for the most spectacular arrival and for being the youngest crew. Standing there together, being recognised alongside crews from around the world, was something I'll never forget.

But when I think about those two weeks, the prizes aren't the thing that matters most. It's waking up aboard a ship with a job to do. It's learning from people who really know their craft.

It's doing your watch, even when you're tired, because someone else is depending on you. It's getting to know a crew so well that people you've only just met become friends you trust.

There isn't really a way to experience that from a classroom. You have to be there, living and working together, with the sea and the weather setting the challenge. It's exciting, but it also teaches responsibility in a way that's hard to describe until you've done it.

I was so proud of Royalist and the part Sea Cadets played in the race. I loved showing visitors around the ship. I wanted them to see what we'd been doing and understand why it mattered to us.

And I know this isn't an ordinary opportunity for a young person. I would never have thought of an international tall ships race as something I could be part of when I was ten. To make it possible, there has to be a ship, kept ready to sail, people with the specialist skills to operate her and train us, and a charity willing to organise these voyages and find the support to help young people get aboard.

The work and fundraising behind the scenes are easy to miss when you're a cadet enjoying the experience, but they are the reason you get the chance in the first place.

For me, offshore wasn't just an extra activity. It was one of the most important parts of growing up in Sea Cadets, and it helped me discover what I was capable of. There were other experiences that helped me grow too.

I completed a Peer-to-Peer Education course where I had to stand up and teach other cadets. At school I'd struggled even to read out loud. If you'd offered me a choice between giving a presentation and walking barefoot across Lego, I'd probably have taken my shoes off.

But I did it, and it helped me find my confidence. Eventually I became one of the older cadets at my unit, and younger people began looking up to me, just as I'd once looked up to others.

I was selected at the Mayor's Cadet where I accompanied the Winchester Mayor on his official duties. I also completed my Bronze, Silver and Gold Duke of Edinburgh's Award expeditions through Sea Cadets.

For Bronze, I led a group of cadets kayaking down the River Wye. For Silver, we kayaked along the Thames towards Oxford, over longer distances and with a rather unhelpful current. For Gold, I completed my Day Skipper qualifications and skippered a historic yacht, built in 1949, on a sailing expedition in the Solent.

Navigation, weather, planning and responsibility for a crew... it was another huge step from the ten-year-old who first walked into Winchester Unit!

I'm now studying for my A-levels and hope to pursue a career in naval architecture. Sea Cadets has helped with that as well. Webinars with people working across the maritime industry introduced me to careers I hadn't properly understood before.

When I look back, what stands out is how each opportunity led to another. My local unit helped me grow and learn. An offshore taster day opened my eyes. Voyages aboard Jack Petchey and Royalist took me much further than I could have imagined. And the Tall Ships Races gave me experiences, friendships and confidence that will stay with me.

So thank you to my family, all the volunteers at Winchester, the staff and crews who make offshore voyages possible, and everyone here who supports the charity and helps put these opportunities within reach.

I arrived at Sea Cadets because my mum thought I might enjoy it. I leave knowing that it has helped shape who I am, and possibly what I'll do with the rest of my life.

Finally, I want to thank all the adults. The volunteers who give up their evenings, weekends and holidays. Everything I've talked about today only happened because they gave their time to help young people like me. Changing the lives of countless cadets, including mine. I genuinely can't thank them enough.

So if there's one thing I'd like people to take away from my story, it's this: Sea Cadets isn't just about sailing, boating or uniforms. It's about opportunities. It's about friendships. It's about confidence. It's about discovering what you're capable of. And for me, it's been one of the most important and rewarding parts of my life.

Thank you very much!