

CHAPTER 3

An Officer and a Gentleman

Charles Parker



I found early on that the only way in which a microphone could be got near enough ... without halting the flow, was for me to approach as unobtrusively as possible with the equipment slung well behind my back, advancing the microphone diffidently towards the source of sound, but myself ignoring the microphone and by refusing to comment on it either in speech or in facial expression, convincing the victim that I was just rather rude and perhaps slightly odd.

CHARLES PARKER, FROM AN INTERNAL BBC MEMO, 1952

I'd say to him, Charles, go home pretty soon ... 'Oh, yes, I will, I'll just finish.' I'd get home, about an hour later, when I was cooking, I'd pick up the telephone: 'Charles, you'll ruin it, you'll go over the top with it.

GO HOME.'

PEGGY BROADHEAD, CHARLES'S BOSS FROM 1948-53,
SPEAKING IN 2007

At the BBC in the early years after the war, Charles Parker's background seemed to epitomise that of the typical producer. Wartime submarine commander, 'good' war, History at Cambridge, and the accent to go with it. He differed from the stereotype, though, by being enthusiastically religious, and by being Conservative in politics, if not in his humane outlook. Many of the post-war broadcasters who hadn't already entered the war with left-wing views certainly tended to acquire them. As with the pre-war Manchester producers such as Olive Shapley, exposure to the post-war hardships of many working people served to accentuate that leaning.

Few who knew Charles Parker realised that his background hadn't been as privileged as his headline CV implied. He had been born in 1919, son of a disabled railway clerk who made a living tramping the streets of Bournemouth, selling paraffin from a handcart. He had died when Charles was seven. His mother, the daughter of a railway worker, had been in domestic service when they married, and later kept a boarding house. For her, cleanliness was next to godliness, a lesson the young Charles absorbed. His father's father had been a seed merchant's clerk in Wisbech, in Cambridgeshire. Theirs was not the grinding poverty of the industrial North, true. But if Charles was to escape a humdrum existence it would have to be by his own efforts.

The first step was to win a scholarship to the local grammar school in Bournemouth. Afterwards, a place at university for someone in his financial position was out of the question, so at 18 he got a job in the metallurgy lab at the National Physical Laboratory in Teddington, down by the Thames in London's western suburbs. Like many in his position, while there he studied in the evening for an Engineering degree at a London Technical Institute. He was about to return for his third year when war was declared.

Submariner

Charles had loved sailing since he was a boy and had worked in a boatyard in the Solent in his school holidays. Before the war he'd joined the RNVR, the naval volunteer reserve, so when it began he was called up. Like so many, afterwards he would speak only sparingly about that period. We do know that he started as a signalman in a minesweeper and saw action at Dunkirk. He was plagued in later life by nightmares following an incident during the evacuation, when his vessel couldn't pick up burned and drowning Indian soldiers whose ship had been blown up alongside his own. He was commissioned as a sub lieutenant in 1940, and for a year was in destroyers before going into submarines – not ideal for a man of well over six foot, who became known as 'Dip-Rod' Parker, constantly bent double. In submarines he saw action with HMS *Porpoise* in the Mediterranean off the North African coast, including escorting relief convoys under continuous fire through the notorious 'bomb alley' to the strategic and beleaguered island of Malta.