Remembering “the Gunga”: How a Plastic Water Container Brought Back a Lifetime of Memories

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A personal story.

I was recently reminded of the old phrase **“Gunga Din”**, and it stopped me in my tracks. Not because I was re-reading Kipling, but because someone online was debating whether the term — now widely misunderstood — is offensive. And that’s when it hit me. To me, “Gunga Din” isn’t an insult. It’s a memory. It’s camping holidays. It’s my dad. And it’s a plastic water container we simply called *“the gunga.”*

I grew up in the **seventies and eighties**, the kind of child who saw family holidays not as a break from routine, but as a full-blown annual *expedition*. Our car — in the early years a **blue Talbot Avenger saloon**, later joined by the Talbot Alpine, a series of trusty Citroëns, and eventually a Citroën C5 Tourer I still own today — was more than just transport. It was our vessel of adventure, often chugging its way across France (or avoiding it entirely in the early days when it was *too expensive*) all the way to **Spain’s Mediterranean coast**.

My dad, born in **1931**, was evacuated to Wales during the war and did his **National Service in the early 1950s**. That military life — those values of practicality, humour, and resilience — never left him. He was the type to fix a broken fan belt with **mum’s tights**, and when the carburettor failed, he once crafted a makeshift diaphragm out of a **plastic carrier bag**. Breakdown? No problem. Roadside repairs weren’t just common — they were part of the story. And we loved it.

He always called our water container “the gunga.” At the time, we didn’t question it. It wasn’t until much later I learned he was referring — through the fog of army slang — to **Kipling’s character Gunga Din**, the Indian water-carrier who, despite being mistreated, saved lives and earned immortal respect in the poem’s final lines:

“You’re a better man than I am, Gunga Din.”

To Dad, it was a term of endearment. A nod to something useful, dependable, loyal. In that sense, **our water container carried more than just water**. It carried a lifetime of values passed from one generation to the next, without us even realising.

Those camping trips evolved. Mum and Dad started with **“bivvies”** — another military phrase, small ridge tents where you could feel the ground and the weather equally. But like everything with my father, **progression was inevitable**: bivvies gave way to a proper **frame tent**, then eventually to a **Conway trailer tent** that, in our family, was the stuff of legend. My nan — my mother’s mum, who lived with us for as long as I can remember — adored it. She called climbing the trailer tent’s step ladder *“going upstairs”*. It made her feel special, even regal.

In later years, I took over the role of **organising our holidays**, determined to keep the annual tradition alive for my now-elderly parents. The Conway eventually gave way to a **caravan**, which allowed us to continue those Mediterranean escapes for another seven years or more. They loved it. And I loved giving them that.

Dad, as I now see more clearly, was **the soul of those holidays**. Practical to the core, always the joker, and a born communicator — even when he didn’t share the same language. He’d talk to *anyone*, arms flailing in semaphore, doing his best with a grin and a laugh. We were sometimes embarrassed, of course. But it never mattered. Camping people are friendly. They got it. They got *him*.

He had phrases for everything — many of them straight out of **The Goon Show**, which he adored. His favourite song after a drink was **The Ying Tong Song** — a perfect snapshot of the humour he passed on to us. He’d been around the world for work, sometimes in places people would now call “developing countries” or worse. But Dad treated **everyone with decency and good humour**, regardless of where they came from. He didn’t need a diversity manual. He had humanity.

Some of the jokes from those days wouldn’t be told now. Not in public. But they weren’t cruel. They came from **real camaraderie, real friendships**, and a mutual understanding forged through lived experience — not hashtags or slogans.

And now, with him gone, I understand myself better. I'm grounded because he was worldly. I question things because he questioned things. I hold memories tight because he created a life full of them.

> *Sadly, our old friend "the gunga" is no more. It vanished somewhere in one of the many upgrades — lost to time, or maybe just retired with quiet dignity like so many of Dad's beloved contraptions. I've searched online, but nothing quite matches the image seared into my memory:* ***a sturdy, cylindrical plastic container, maybe 40 centimetres tall and 30 wide****, the very definition of function over form. We have no real photos of it. We never thought we'd need them. Back then, it was just part of the kit — not something you'd pose with. But that's the beauty of these memories, isn't it? They don't need to be framed to be permanent.*

What everyday objects from your childhood now carry more meaning than you ever expected?
Have you got a "gunga" of your own?
Feel free to share in the comments — I'd love to hear your story.