



London and Home Counties Branch

The newsletter

My recent ramblings on the Dartmouth training of RFA cadets, gave me thought for the training of deck officers in the Merchant Navy from the middle of the 19th century until today. A couple of years ago, my niece, who was living in Winchester, had a lodger who was ex Royal Navy lieutenant and had decided he wanted to have another sea going career so he was training at the School of Navigation in Warsash near Southampton. As that was my original Alma Mater, he invited me to come and have a look around, to see the modern SON. It was very interesting and showed me how modern sea going is now so different to when I first went to sea in the 1960's. However, in conversation with some of the students, they failed to understand why we had to undergo things like parade ground training, a la the Royal Navy. As someone who was brought up in that type of regime, it had seemed perfectly normal to me, but in 2018, I have to admit I couldn't really think of a good reason why merchant navy deck officers had to undergo that sort of training. No doubt some readers of my vintage will say that it made a man out of you... taught you discipline... smartness etc, etc. But I have to admit, that I had thought in the past that if I had spent more time learning navigation and seamanship, and less time on the parade ground, it would have better benefitted me for a career at sea. At that time there were four main training establishments for deck officers for the merchant navy – *HMS Worcester*,

Conway, *Pangbourne*, and *Warsash*. All had the RN type of training in uniforms, marching, and rifle drill, as well as classroom teaching. In *Worcester* and *Conway*, as old wooden walls, additional training was climbing the masts (and no doubt reefing topsails as well).



*...left right left right... ok you lot...
lets try port starboard port
starboard..!! Seamanship training circa
1963*

Luckily for me Warsash was a more enlightened establishment and we did not have to do such things, in any case we had no masts to climb. By the end of the 19th century, training had started to include engineers and radio officers, and their establishments decided that they did not need to ape the RN, and their students were taught their trade with none of the nonsense of parade ground training. So, I suppose if the present RFA officers training requires them to yomp over Dartmoor, then for us old timers our training was equally fit for our generation. [Peter Harrison]

Ed: The important part of my radio officer training was an ability to avoid

electric shock when servicing a transmitter, post a liquid lunch!

Branch 2020 AGM

The 10th of June was 'extraordinary' with us conducting online our 2020 Branch AGM. Copies of the minutes and Officers' Reports have been forwarded to Branch members by email and where appropriate snail mail.

Please check your payment to RFAA

Head office have alerted us to the fact that a significant proportion of the annual subscriptions are not being received. Please make sure your subs are being paid, and if paying by direct debit make sure everything is in order at your bank. For further details please contact **Ray Bennett, National Chairman**. Email – chairman@rfa-association.org.uk
Website – <http://www.rfa-association.org.uk/index.php/utilities/membership-forms>

...continuing on my First Ship

Cherryleaf's next port of call was Plymouth, this first tripper Junior Engineer was going home! They arrived in and were berthed by lunchtime and by mid afternoon he was on his way home. So much to tell mother. No opportunity to meet up with his friends ... however, *Cherryleaf* had been kind to him ... let him have the time off but he had to be back on board for lunch the following day. Work in the afternoon and warming through the main engine early the next morning as they were on their way to load port at Abadan. But first it was the Suez Canal. Very disappointing as he saw little of it. Ships were grouped in convoys and sailed slowly through the canal. For the engineers it meant working six hours on and six hours off during the thirty hours transit.

Two weeks after departing Plymouth *Cherryleaf* arrived in Abadan. During

the last week of the voyage the ambient temperature was 120 °F. The engine room was even higher. Air conditioning was poor and it was difficult to sleep. Abadan was a six hour river passage up the Shatt Al Arab river, and the ambient temperature went up another ten degrees. Once alongside loading of the oil cargo started and the usual routine maintenance in the engine room was undertaken. No shore leave as there was nothing there except the oil refinery. By mid- day, the following day the ship was fully loaded and en route for Singapore – twelve days away.

The ship planned arrived in Singapore in the early morning then a short passage around to the naval port of Sembawang. Once on the berth, discharging would commence which would last about two days. For the engine room the usual routine maintenance was undertaken. No time to go ashore except in the evening provided one was not on duty. He managed to get one evening ashore for shopping and seeing a little of Singapore, though it was mainly Sembawang. Cargo discharged and *Cherryleaf* was on her way back to Abadan. There she loaded again and sailed this time for Suez and Malta. It was good to go ashore and see some of the island. As before, forty-eight hours to discharge and perform the routine maintenance before en route back to Abadan – load again and then head for Singapore again. To be continued...
[Colin Spencer]

...memories of my 21st in Malta

May 4th 1959 was a special day for me. It was my 21st birthday and I was in Malta. Perhaps that is why Malta has always been a special place for me. Having served an apprenticeship in marine engineering at John G. Kincaid in Greenock, it was already written in the wind that I would go to sea, as some of my family had done before me in both

the Royal Navy and Merchant Navy, and they had served in the war, which had only concluded 13 years before I started my working life.

My first view of Valetta was through the porthole in the steering compartment of *RFA Tideflow*. She was my second ship, and my first with the RFA. I'll never forget that first sighting of the yellow stone buildings standing out so prominently in the bright sunlight.

On the day of my birthday, both my pal – another Junior Engineer – and I decided to go ashore in the evening. Our first port of call was Joe Grech's bar, where we started drinking rum. I wasn't a drinker as such then. Only a few months before, my father had taken me to a pub in Greenock before I joined my first ship. His intention was to 'teach' me how to drink and be able to hold my liquor. We had two half pints of beer and then went home!

So, here I was in Grech's bar – a 'seasoned' drinker and enjoying my first taste of rum. It was, I remember, quite nice compared to beer. At some stage, our Chief Engineer came into the bar and enquired as to what we were celebrating. On hearing of my new found 'adulthood' and love of rum, he bought us both a rum and gave me a piece of advice.

"Rum", he said, "has a habit of making one feel happy, full of confidence, whilst, at the same time, having the ability to render one's legs quite useless". "Right, right, Chief. Thanks for the advice." and then we started looking at some other establishment where we would try out the Chief's theory. "Rubbish! I'm feeling fine; nothing wrong with my legs." I think we had got as far as the Bing Crosby bar – now I must admit that, by that time, it may even have been called the Shirley Temple bar for all I know.

So, time to head back up the hill for a nightcap at friendly Joe Grech's. Suddenly we remembered we had to be

on the harbour-side by midnight for a boat back to the '*Flow*', which was by now at anchor and preparing to leave at about 0400. We dashed through the Gardens, but too late. The last liberty boat had gone.

I cannot remember exactly how we found a stone staircase back down to the harbour, but I do remember running down the steps and trying to slow down when they came to a turn. I stuck my left hand out, grabbed a handrail and flew sideways onto my left hip. Even now, at my ripe old age, that hip reminds me of my legless capers that night in Malta.

So, we picked ourselves up and continued down to the harbour, near the Customs House. I haven't told you what my pal's name was, as he may not want to be associated with what came next. He decided he needed to be sick (well, we had had a few by then and all that running and falling seemed to have upset his digestion). As he rushed to the harbour edge, I just managed to grab him by his belt, stopping him from going head-first into the drink. He thanked me for getting hold of him and then asked me to hold his glasses and hold him by his belt again as he discharged into Valetta Harbour what had been a good run ashore.

However, we still had to get out to the ship because the liberty had left. Again, my memory is hazy, as I had taken on the persona of 'Captain Morgan', but we managed to get a lift out to the ship on, I think, a pilot boat.

The skipper of the boat took us around the stern of *Tideflow*, where we found a rope ladder hanging from the ship and almost down to water level. I didn't think of it at the time, as I was concentrating on getting my legs to work as we climbed up the ladder, but I've since wondered how many times the ladder had been left out for idiots like us. I wouldn't have dared ask the Chief if he had had anything to do with it!

The happy outcome was that I was in the engine room at 0400, going on watch, whilst 'Dave' was fast asleep in his pit. [Stan McCabe]



...oh dear!! The Chief's suffering 'boltdown' again... Do you think he's been on that new Rum cocktail they call 'rope ladder'?

...Pink Elephants

RFA Gold Ranger (Capt NBJ Stapleton) had recently to alter course when sailing from Trincomalee to avoid an elephant which was swimming across the harbour. A trip they apparently take not infrequently – this year one elephant was timed to do the trip in 16 minutes.

When asked why he had not mentioned this episode to higher authorities, Capt Stapleton replied that “he did wish to retain his command for his last year!”

[*Naval Stores Journal* (June 1961)]

...Life as a Harbour Master

A decade after leaving the RFA I had become the Harbour Master of Harwich Haven Authority. It has always been something of a learn-on-the-job role that you tend to fall into rather than set your cap at, and all the management skills I learned in the RFA were called on I can assure you! HHA is a trust port that overseas five ports, including Felixstowe, and manages its own port services. It was a great job with a wonderful boss and a close team. During that time, I was invited to join

Trinity House and got to help design a custom-built *Cara Marine* pilot boat, and ferry it back from Cork. I was also on the team of harbour masters who drafted the Port Marine Safety Code after the *Sea Empress* tragedy. This heralded the era of risk assessments, and is probably my proudest achievement, as it has made a significant improvement in navigational safety.

But all good things come to an end, and a change at the top of HHA changed the dynamic to an unhappy one. About that time the Port of Melbourne, Australia's largest container port, was looking for a replacement for their HM, who was dying of cancer. They were looking internationally as with a very small home fleet, the experience pool down under is not large. I would love to say I got the nod because I was RFA, but my new boss wouldn't have known what the RFA was! Of course any mariners I meet do know, and simply saying “I was RFA” is enough. Instant respect. To be continued... [Dave Shennan]



It's not a 'Singapore Sling' but Dave Shennan demonstrates that the former HMS Terror is still a watering hole for seafarers with RFA connections.

...at the launch of RFA Eddyreef

“...my introduction to the tanker fleet took place soon after I entered the Admiralty service. A small cargo vessel called the *Thistle* had been purchased

with the intention on converting her to the carriage of liquid fuel and renaming her appropriately. The member of the Board of Admiralty concerned, the Controller, was discussing with a certain senior officer of the department the question of a suitable name...and after considering many alternatives and rejecting them all...announced suddenly that the difficulty was solved. The officer himself, who spoke not with the forthright standard English accent of the North, but in the less pretentious, more dulcent tone of one born within the sound of Bow Bells, had unconsciously supplied the answer, and the ship was named the *Isla* which was the way he pronounced the word 'oiler'."



....learning the RFA's TLAs

I joined *RFA Sir Galahad* as an ex-commercial second trip 3rd Officer and was flung into the Liverpool – Belfast run during 'The Troubles' in that neck of the woods. I had never seen an LSL before, let alone served aboard one, and was still trying to get to grips with the RFA lingo where everything seemed to be in TLA's - Three Letter Abbreviations!

We were in Liverpool one day, embarking bits and pieces for the Squaddies in Belfast and it was fascinating for me to see the variety of stuff that we embarked! Anyway, the Chief Officer, presumably appreciating the fact that I was still very much a makee-learner, decided that it would be good experience for me to work out a cargo stowage plan for our return trip from Belfast back to Liverpool. In those days there used to be a selection of cardboard cut-outs in one of the drawers in the Choff's Office which

represented the different types of military vehicles we might be asked to load so that these could be used, if necessary, to move around on a cut-out of the tank deck chopping and changing as required, to plan the best possible stowage so that there was a minimal waste of space.

He told me I was quite fortunate as all we were due to bring back were 16 PIGs for a stern load and a bow discharge. He showed me where the cardboard thingies were and said that he would give me a while to work out the best stowage plan and that I was to let him know if there were any additional bits and pieces we required to secure the pigs and off he went. I remember thinking to myself that it was a terrible waste of money to send a ship like *Sir Galahad* all the way across to Belfast just to bring back 16 PIGs! Anyway, I had a real brainwave and didn't need the cardboard thingies at all and after 10 minutes I went to Choff and said I had worked it all out. He looked at me a bit strangely and asked if I was sure and I said certainly and that I wasn't stupid and in fact hadn't even needed the cardboard thingies at all. He then asked me if we required any additional bits and pieces and I told him all we needed were 'some bales of straw and a decent, strong bit of rope'. Looking somewhat askance at this he asked me what I proposed to do. Well – I started off by saying what a waste of money, etc and then launched into my brilliant plan. I told him I would have the PIGs herded down the stern ramp from the jetty onto the tank deck and then 'persuade' them to trot all the way forward into the bow door space which I would have already covered with the straw and once they were all in, I would then rope the area off so that they couldn't amble around the tank deck on the way home in case they hurt themselves. As I was serenading him with this audacious plan, he began to get somewhat

apoplectic and his face turned alarming shades of red and purple. I thought the poor chap was ill and asked him if he was okay. He managed to gasp at me and enquired in a dangerous-sounding tone of voice “*Are you taking the piss?*” and I was somewhat taken aback and a bit hurt to say the least! I assured him that I was *not* and he then asked me if I had any understanding at all of what a PIG was. I thought that he was trying to be terribly hurtful at my expense and enquired of him whether or not *he* was taking the piss which did not go down too well!. When he asked me to describe to him what a PIG was, I promptly told him that it was a ‘*pinkish sort of animal with hooves and that went oink-oink*’.

Oh dear!! If only he had explained beforehand that the term PIG meant an armoured personnel carrier then the whole sorry saga would not have resulted in raised voices, frayed tempers and high blood pressure for both of us. [James Smith]

...Frock Coats for RFA officers

In BR Eight Hundred and Seventy-five
It is written in type bold and clear
That a frock coat with buttons, with belt
and with buckles
Can be worn, with the hands at the rear.

A frock coat, you say, in each officer’s kit?
And what of the hat and the boots
shining bright?
Do you know what we’re like? We’re all
shapes and all sizes
Some long ‘uns, some sort, some fat
and some slight.

Consider our plight, My Admiralty
Lords,
Lend ear to our plea for further debate
Don’t rig us all out like proverbial ‘Cock
Sparrers’
By Gad, Sirs, t’would be an
unparalleled fate

We don’t reckon, no how to emulate
Nelson
For tradition and dignity let the Navy
have sway
Let us please carry on in our old reefer
jackets
Like our mates in the liners and tankers
today.

Ed: ...this is deemed an appropriate postscript to the Chairman’s ramblings in Edition 4. However, one could also see it as a moment of foresight by the editor of the March 1961 edition of the Naval Store Journal.



**How many more times?
It’s 2 meters you Tit!!**
[Courtesy of John Littlechild]

NHS UK INFO

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/>

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<https://www.rfaa-london.org.uk>
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All opinions expressed in The Newsletter are those of individuals members of our ‘stay-in club’ and not of the Association.