



THE NEWSLETTER

of the London and Home Counties Branch – September 2020

What is life like after leaving the RFA, and I don't mean retirement, but leaving before reaching the giddy heights of captain or chief engineer. These "early leavers" included myself, having become a chief officer, decided for whatever reason that life in the RFA was not for them. As I was living in Folkestone, I went to see Townsend Thoresen in Dover to ask about any vacancies. After their initial surprise that anyone with a Masters Certificate (Class 1) who lived within 50 miles of Dover who was not on the ferries, they offered me a position of Second Officer with immediate effect. I had to explain that I was still employed by the RFA but I would get back to them.

The ferries employed mainly deck officers with a Masters Certificate, something that annoyed the deep-sea companies who had trained and paid for these officers to obtain the various certificates. Having obtained their certificates, they then left and joined the ferry companies who had contributed nothing at all towards the training of these officers. My first ship, *Free Enterprise 3*, was one of the older vessels and was permanently employed on the Dover to Calais route, so remembering what it was like when in the RFA we passed through the Dover Straits with everyone closed up at action stations, I was surprised that after leaving Dover, the captain handed the ship to me and vanished. One could of course become blasé when doing this every day, but I learnt that in some people's minds a crossing vessel keeps

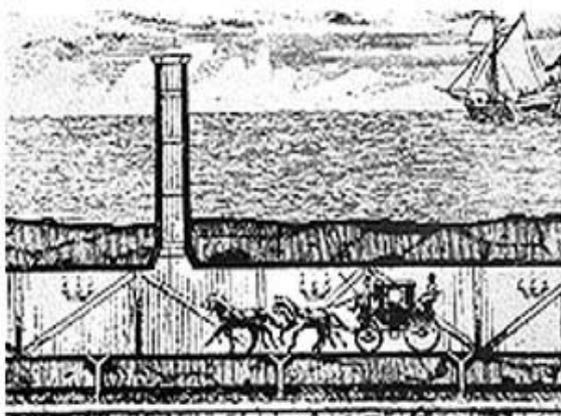
clear of vessels in the Separation lanes. One such vessel was *RFA Olmeda* who stood on when she was the giving way ship, when I asked if she was going to give way, she retorted that ships in the lanes have priority over crossing vessels. I then asked her to quote me which Rule-of-the-Road stated this, but there was no reply. I was forced to keep out of his way.

Coming from the RFA, I was not used to passengers, and certainly not over 1,000 of them in the summer (no channel tunnel in those days). Anyone who has had dealings with the general public will know that they are not easy to deal with especially after a lot of duty-free drinks. A coach load of Metropolitan policemen was so drunk that we had to call the Kent Police to remove them at Dover. After the RFA one had to learn commercial practices, one such was at Calais when the weather was blowing about Force 7, in those days we had two hours turn rounds, but the Chief officer wanted to start loading as soon as we had emptied the vessel. I queried this and he explained that if we loaded now then the passengers had an hour to buy food and feed themselves, so that they could throw it all up later ... but they had paid for the food.

Like so many things in life, there are innumerable stories of life in the Dover Straits, but space precludes them, maybe a longer article some other time. Next time you choose to cross the Channel, if you go by the Tunnel, remember your erstwhile colleagues rely upon you to keep them employed,

so enjoy the sea breezes on the surface, and not sit in a railway truck at the bottom of the ocean.

[Peter Harrison]



Reportedly overheard in a conversation between our Chairman and a Clankie.

"It's ok for your old chap ... as a Chief you get your own ship and exhaust system, as a Choff it's someone else's ship and exhaust system ... so I had little choice but to tick one of those 'How do you see your future? boxes':

- [a] Booze with vomit coming from all compass points, or*
- [b] Booze with horses' wind in a confined space..."*

Time and Tides wait for no man –

Approval was first given in 1953 to name these tankers within the *Tide* class – *Tidereach*, *Tiderace* and *Tiderange*. For the optimistic their dream was that further similar vessels would be distinguished by a variation of the initial letter of the 'suffix', eg, *Tideset*, *Tidesalt* etc. so enabling ships of various programmes to be recognised.

Experience during Operation Musketeer (Suez 1956) and later in 'Exercise Strikeback' revealed an unacceptable degree of confusion between the ship names in tactical communications. By 1957 a range of alternative names was being proposed by the Director of Stores, such as: *Tideflow*, *Tidecrest*, *Tidesurge*,

Tidemuse, *Tidewave*, *Tideebb* and *Tidesprings*.

This was followed with a solution, agreed by the Ships' Names Committee – that *Tidereach* be retained, but that *Tiderace* be renamed *Tidecrest* and *Tiderange* be renamed as *Tidesurge*. However, in March 1958, following an oversight by the Registrar General of Shipping and Seamen it was revealed that they had approved the name *Tidecrest* to a commercial ship.

After so used to getting their own way for so long 'shock' appears to have swept through the Naval Stores Department -- another name would have to be found. After much teeth sucking and head scratching a further raft of alternative names was proposed: *Tideflow*, *Tidemuse*, *Tide-Ebb* (sic), *Tidesprings* (sic), *Tidebore*, *Tidesalt*, *Tidefall* and *Tideneap* with the preference for *Tiderace* to be renamed *Tideflow*. For interest the RGSS re-naming fee for each vessel was £19 (in old money). [Tom Adams]



... invited guests at sea (Wives)

[continued] Our next stop was Singapore where Dorothy and I had met. Standard for Leaf Boats was that maintenance started as soon as Finished With Engines had been rung. After a few hours work, a quick shower and change we were on our way to Sembawang and then onto Orchard Road. Back on board by midnight, a night cap then bed. At 0800 the next day we were back in the engine room to finish the work list. A short run ashore that evening, a short sleep then back in the engine room by 0600 as we were sailing for the Persian Gulf. However, we did not go to Abadan but to Mena el

Ahmadi an oil terminal near Kuwait. On one occasion we had to wait before we went alongside the terminal.



She didn't see the ship overtaking us...

The crew decided to go fishing and launched one of the life boats. They invited Dorothy to join them. First surprise! Dorothy thought that she would have to climb down on a rope ladder from the main deck which was a short distance. Wrong, they lowered the rope ladder from the lifeboat deck and she had to climb down twenty or so feet into the lifeboat. Off she went with the crew and they very kindly put the bait onto the hook which Dorothy dangled in the water. She was in luck and she caught a fish but the crew had to take the fish off the hook for her. She was the only one to catch a fish, I have a vague suspicion that the crew put the fish on her hook. By time they returned to the ship a rope ladder had been lowered from the main deck so the climb up was quite short. At dinner that night Dorothy had fish... that is to say that they cooked the fish that she had caught but the size of fish she caught and the size of fish that was served was slightly different!

For the next few months, it was a standard routine. Load in the Persian Gulf then either Singapore or the Med (Gib or Malta). We managed to go ashore in both places but four or five hours in each is hardly enough to see anything. If we stopped for main engine repairs during the daytime, would visit the engine room to see what we were

doing. Very quickly she learnt the various sizes of spanners and peer into the crankcase from outside. Too oily and smelly to go in. However, starting the main engine after repairs she would answer the telegraph for us.



A film would be shown once a week when we were at sea. There would be two sittings so that all those on watch could see the film. One evening we were visited by a ghost, or at least we thought it was a ghost. The late (after dinner) film show was on and the lights had been turned out when suddenly the door into the lounge burst open and a ghostly white figure appeared moaning and groaning with his arm over the top of his head. In alarm the lights were turned on and the ghostly figure in his white boiler suit, face covered in blood, turned out to be the 4th Engineer. He had been standing under a vent in the engine room when some lumps of rust had fallen on to his bald head and cut his scalp. As you can imagine, Leaf Boat sense of humour kicked in and he was told that if he had been working as he should have been this wouldn't have happened!

A change in the routine happened on one occasion. After we had loaded in Mena el Ahmadi we were instructed to join a Fleet Exercise. This meant that we spent a few days refuelling various war ships mostly, British. At the end of

the exercise we visited Muscat. With other RN ships in the Exercise it gave the film officer (3rd Mate) the chance to exchange films.

One of the British ships was a submarine. I asked the 3rd Mate if he would call up the sub to see if he could exchange films with them. I asked him that if he did speak to the sub and they agreed to change films then could I speak to the Captain of the sub. Shortly afterwards I was talking to the Captain of the submarine. I explained to him that I had my wife on board and that she had never been on a submarine, I wondered if we could come over at the time of the film change. He said, yes, but added that he would need half an hour to make sure the crew were suitably dressed for a lady coming on board. Half an hour later we were scrambling onto the saddle tanks and climbing down the forward hatch. After looking at the torpedo tubes we walked aft through the various compartments arriving in the control room where they raised the main and attack periscopes for us to look through. They gave a very good view of Muscat. We continued aft through the accommodation to the stern tubes and then out through the aft hatch. A most enjoyable visit.

That evening we had been invited to the Sultan's Palace for cocktails (soft drinks). After the party we walked back to the jetty, it was dark and under Muscat laws we had to carry lights. If you weren't carrying any lights the police could arrest you. We were then invited back on board one of the British frigates for a night cap. I seem to remember having more than one. Then back to *Bayleaf* and the normal routine – load in the Persian Gulf, discharge in Singapore or Gib/Malta.

Chinese New Year arrived just after one of our visits to Singapore. In order to have fresh chicken/fish the crew modified one of their bathrooms to incorporate suitable facilities for the live

creatures. On the day we were treated to a most enjoyable meal of numerous courses. This was washed down with the odd glass or two of whisky. As only the standard tumbler glasses were available and these were kept full. Dorothy declined the whisky and opted for sherry which came in the standard tumbler. The ship was stopped for main engine repairs during lunch time.

After I had been on the ship for over nine months for six of those months Dorothy had been with me, it was time to go on leave. On our last arrival in Singapore I was relieved, Dorothy and I flew back to the UK, courtesy of the RAF. It had been terrific to have her on board, to experience life at sea, the humour, the hard work and the team work, sometimes in difficult conditions with temperatures over 140 °F (60 °C) and rough seas. You needed that sense of humour to survive. [Colin Spencer]



...to be (SEEN) or not to be (SEEN)

An interesting snippet that relates to two alleged incidents that occurred in Haakonsvern, near Bergen during a visit there by *RFA Olna* late in 1970. Four of her crew, no doubt fuelled by an elegant sufficiency of some liquid or other, decided one evening that it would be a jolly good idea to 'visit' *HM Submarine Walrus*. She was berthed astern of the tanker, during which they left their calling card by painting the submarine's conning tower an immaculate shade of white -- excellent -- as submarines were painted an overall black!

Unfortunately the submarine had no stock of black paint and *Olna* only had black gloss. This was kindly presented to the submarine whose chaps then got to work on re-painted their conning

tower in black gloss. Sadly their efforts were in vain as the white paint just shone through. It is assumed that Flag Officer Submarines was not terribly impressed when *Walrus* returned to Gosport sporting her new-look camouflage scheme. It is difficult to think, for one minute, that the escapade was put down to the normal 'high spirits' jargon which was often used to 'cover up' misdemeanour's – it is felt there were some serious questions asked afterwards.

Not content with that escapade, the four sailors from *Olna* then set fire to the Old Man's hire car parked on the jetty. This obviously resulted in a visit from the Norwegian Constabulary!

The four chaps in question were sacked from the ship and later faced criminal charges in a Norwegian Court. However, it is hoped that they all found new employment. [Annon]

...Message mix-up

I recall on joining my first ship that the Senior RO told me "Whatever you have been taught at college you can forget!" so I did!

Much to the disgruntlement of all who had contact with me, well as far as training was concerned. I was fortunate enough to have a training officer onboard that first ship, and as I was supernumery his intention was to make me into a deck officer, as I was just tagged onto the other two cadets onboard.

I did a lifeboat ticket, a steering ticket, NBCD ticket, in point of fact I had so many tickets I could have joined London Transport.

The story I would like to relate is as follows:

We were languishing in Hong Kong at an army base of Shamshi Po, as we were under the control of the Army being an LSL (Landing Ship Logistics) and tasked to take various pieces of

machinery up to Hong Kong and then to take various regiments on exercise around the Far East.

Well my stay in Hong Kong was just fantastic, but after four months we were all a little short of the readies, as a sailor's life is very much the high life for a short period of time, then sea and saving.

The signal eventually came through that we were all waiting for, and that was to embark Ghurkha's for passage to Brunei via Kota Kinabalu.

The Ghurkha's were a strange set, with such beliefs that they would be seasick once they went onboard, the Doctor was on standby with seasick pills on the gangway, and that they would contract TB if doing PE at night! But a more hardier bunch of blokes you couldn't wish to meet.

The one thing even on a short sea voyage is boredom, so the Ghurkha CO came to discuss what on earth these chaps could do on the confines of the ship. Well as I was the film officer, second security officer, junior radio officer and the list goes on – I came up with the idea of film shows during the night and tug of war on the tank deck, so it was PE as long as in daylight.

I was also issued with three Ghurkha signallers all very proficient at morse code and we went from a single operator period to full time broadcast, which was transmitted from Hong Kong, and this consisted of the usual suspects of weather, navigation, news and of course our signals.

The signals were all in a five figure code as it was the general broadcast for all of Her Majesties shipping in that area.

Our trip first included a visit to Kota Kinabalu where we were to fly our helicopter off the flight deck and deliver urgent medical aid. So we lay off the coast and did our mission of mercy!

Then on to the port of Muara at Brunei where we were to discharge our cargo and the Ghurkha's.

Because the port had only just been completed and a commercial port at that, the Captain specifically requested that I take down details of entering port and also obtaining a pilot.

That was simple enough as our callsign was on the next traffic list, and I took down very carefully, well I thought very carefully, full docking details. I asked for a repeat, I even got my boss to have a go! No avail, so I went onto the bridge to see the Old Man and explain.

Well he was resident in his bridge chair, and accompanying him was the Ghurkha CO, a regimented man, a colonel of high standing.

"Excuse me Sir, the signal has come in from Port Muara, but I think there is a mistake"

"Read it out young man"

"Well I would rather discuss this with you on your own!"

"Read it out, I am sure that Colonel Smith won't mind"

I took a deep breath and read out the telegram.

"Anchor in the shit"

The eyes of the colonel rose, and the Captain looked at me and asked:

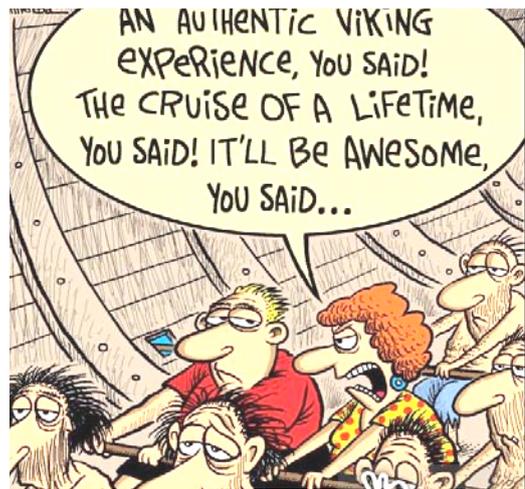
"How long have you been at sea Mr Fernley?"

"Nine months, two weeks and 3 days Sir"

"And you don't know the difference between a good 'spit' and a 'shit'? Radio Officers, what I could do without them!"

I left the bridge feeling very distraught, but it made the telling of a good tale.

[Richard Fernley]



Wives at sea... this is the bit that Colin omitted from his piece.

A reminder to us all

Owing to the elephant in the room the following apply:

September 6th Merchant Navy Day Parade at Tower Hill has been cancelled and there will be no requirement for our Standard to be paraded...

Seafarers Service at St. Paul's that was scheduled for Wednesday 7th October has also been cancelled.

Our next physical meeting is likely to be the Christmas Lunch at The Admiralty, Trafalgar Square (although it appears closed at the moment).

Any suggestions for next years meetings (social or otherwise) gratefully received by our Secretary.

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All opinions expressed in are those of individual members of our 'stay-in club' and not of the Association.