



THE NEWSLETTER

of the London and Home Counties Branch – November 2020

Watching a 'You Tube' documentary on a warship, *HMS Chatham*, it struck me how much has changed with communications for the personnel on the vessel. There were scenes of people watching the BBC news, and being able to send emails to their families. I mentioned change because when I first joined the RFA such things did not exist, as I remember as a cadet when the vessel was at anchor, being sent up the mast to move the TV aerial when the ship moved. Of course, everything changes, and not just at sea, living in Nigeria I was also able to watch Sky and the BBC. This is modern living, and it is good for today's sailors to be able to have the latest news and TV programmes the same as anyone living ashore. It is said that there is a problem recruiting sailors for submarines because they cannot use their phones or see TV programmes whilst under the ocean. Now it is easy for us old salts to sneer at the modern sailor, and say it was nothing like that when I was at sea, times were hard in those days, and every finger was a marlin spike. Yes of course comparatively speaking looking back 50 years it does look like something from *HMS Victory*, but similar to anything in any age we accepted it because that was the norm. In my first ship we were eleven months away based in Malta, and I only spoke to my parents once on the telephone, when I booked a call from the Hotel Phoenicia in Valletta. In later years when booking a call from the ship, the radio officer had

(does it still exist?) to book a call, and then to be told you were number five in the queue behind the *Queen Mary*. The big difference I suppose, was that letter writing was still supreme, and the arrival of the mail bags was eagerly anticipated when you arrived in port. As someone who had been to boarding school, writing letters was not a big deal, but for others who had come straight to sea from their mummies, this was something completely new. However, one has to hand it to the naval postal service that it was very efficient at delivering the mail, even when on the Beira Patrol, the RAF dropped the mail to you for picking up from the sea. For whatever reason I have kept most of those letters from my family, and it is interesting to read them from over sixty years ago. Clearly the modern sailor will not be able to read his or hers emails in sixty years' time. This is not an attempt to turn the clock back, as modern seafaring, or at least in the RFA, is perhaps more congenial than in my time, but to acknowledge that not everything in the past at sea was unpleasant. Finally, if I have made errors regarding modern comms, please forgive me, as I am only picking them up from the TV. [Peter Harrison]

Ed: Sadly Dear Chairman. Marconi has gone... the Morse key has gone... Portishead has gone and the daily 500 word 'seapress' is no more. However, one's smart phone works worldwide without any of these and you can still call home, read the RFAA Facebook page on-line, refer to your NHS Covid App and receive limitless fake news!



Remembrance Sunday 8th November 2020

This dam'd bug has really changed the world we know and sadly we have to announce that National Remembrance at Whitehall, will be different. There will be no parade...details are scarce and at this moment we are unsure how wreath laying will be accomplished or how the centenary of the Cenotaph will be marked.

Our Remembrance wreath laying by 'Ancient Mariners' at the Tower Hill Memorial will take place under heavily revised orders...our wreath will be there but not our people.



...and you really believe we had no difficulties before Covid!!!



Life after the RFA...

Part 1 – After nearly twelve months away visiting some exotic countries in the Middle East, Far East, Beira and

Mombasa, I was relieved and flew home. It didn't take us long to decide that this was no life and that it was time to look for something which would keep me home for more time than I was away.

The first choice saw me ending up in Holyhead, the weather was even wetter than Plymouth. After a few months of this a second choice was lecturing in Marine Engineering at a Technical College. I enjoyed the lecturing and the research. I think I learnt more preparing for the lecture than I did as a student. At the same time, I learnt much from the students. It was one thing to research the subject but to speak to the guys who had worked on the machinery they provided a lot of information. It taught me a lesson to listen as the information they gave was from experience and they were not backward in correcting the lecturer.

This job lasted twelve months and my wife found me my next job as a surveyor for one of the Classification Societies. The position was based in London and involved surveying ships under survey or repair and witnessing tests on machinery in factories where the equipment was destined for a new construction. The tests and inspections included reviewing radiographs of welds and testing of the machinery under pressure or operation.

The job was certainly not boring. One day you could be on a small coaster, the next on a VLCC. Then there would be witnessing the testing of the new equipment in the manufacturers. On one occasion I had to attend a VLCC that had discharged its cargo and had cleared for foreign. I had to witness a black out test of the generators. When the Captain heard this, he was rather concerned and insisted that he had to take the ship out into the North Sea well clear of the land in case there was difficulty re-starting. It was in the early years of automation. After steaming out

into the North Sea the ship was blacked out. A long four minutes later we heard the emergency diesel start up and slowly the ship came back to life, first with the steering. The sequel to this was when I came ashore. There was a bit of a blow in the North Sea and the rise and fall of the pilot boat was quite interesting to the point where the harbour pilot was thinking to postpone our departure and organise the pilot boat for the Channel. We came ashore and as the ship had cleared for foreign we had to go through Immigration. After a short argument the Immigration accepted the pilot's word that I had joined the ship in London.

The survey job was very interesting and quite varied and an eye opener on the various crews and their training. In those days the drinking water tanks in the Lifeboats were usually galvanised steel and after a few years the galvanising had been wasted allowing the drinking water to come into contact with the steel. It was interesting to see the various shades of brown of the water. I would drain a cup full and give it to the officer to drink invariably he would refuse. One could then remind him that had they needed to abandon ship they would have to drink that water. It was their responsibility and in their own interest to ensure that the tanks were regularly cleaned and filled with clean water.

The job covered all areas on the ship. For example, during test of launching a lifeboat, after half an hour the lifeboat had still not been launched. I had been lucky as a Junior Engineer on one ship we were on the lifeboat deck not taking it serious when we were told off by the Chief Engineer in no uncertain terms, threaten us with all sorts of extra work if we didn't buck up. A week later after he had cooled down and we were paying attention during the drill he apologised to us. He explained that during the war he had been torpedoed twice and twice

he had to take to the life boats. Had they not been able to launch those boats he wouldn't be here. It came home to us how important these tests were. As a surveyor during testing of a lifeboat, if the boat couldn't be quickly lowered, we would go to next boat or the next day if until they could do it quickly.

It was similar to the emergency fire pump. It was surprising to find that occasionally there was problems in starting the pump engine and opening the valves. One only has to visit a ship after it has been on fire to appreciate the importance of the equipment being properly maintained and the crew properly trained.

After a few years in London, I was called into the office of my boss and asked if I would go to Malta. I was a little surprised and didn't reply immediately. Then he said that I could take my wife and family as well. I immediately replied yes and when, his answer in the next couple of weeks. A couple of hours later I was sitting down with the family having dinner and casually mentioned to my wife that we were going to Malta. My wife replied when are you going? My reply, not me but all of us. A short pause and my wife said OK. Just over two weeks later we were on the flight to Malta.

Later that evening after the children had gone to bed we sat down and talked about what we had to do, organise and prepare for. My boss had not said for how long we would be going which posed a small logistical problem amongst all the others. My wife's father had been in the RAF and she was use to moving from base to base but everything was organised by her father, now we had to do it and with only two or three weeks, notice. The next week was rather hectic to say the least...

[to be continued] [Colin Spencer]



...and life in the RFA

When we left Cammell Lairds in Birkenhead on *RFA Tidereach* on 27th April 1966 it was with a new Master – a Captain Barker and he made it quite obvious that if you had gold braid on your uniform it was OK but if you were one of ‘them down below’ you stood no chance!

We called in at Gibraltar, across the Med through Suez to Aden and on to Singapore. Whilst there we visited Hong Kong, Tawau in Sabah (then North Borneo) Pulau Tioman and then on to Gan Island and Mombasa.

At every port an RPC (rather posh communication) was sent out to all the young ladies saying:

The Captain and Officers of RFA Tidereach invite you on board for drinks and eats these will be served by the Catering Staff we look forward to meeting you.

However, if you were one of ‘them down below’ and you invited a young lady onto the ship, you were told in no uncertain terms to ‘get her off this ship, we don't want her type on board’ and so there was a certain resentment towards the officers from the crew. When we visited Tawau, the usual bevvvy of ladies came on board for the pleasure of the officers whilst the crew were in the bar supping a few bevvy's. When the time arrived for the ship's liberty boat to take the guests ashore, about a dozen of the crew came up onto the boat deck and sat on the rails, after dropping their shorts. When the boat left the gangway all the ladies could see was about twelve bare bottoms hanging over the rails with the lads cheering!

Eventually, after a few months on the Beira Patrol we started to head for

home, calling in at Steamer Point in Aden several of the lads went ashore in Aden where it was possible to buy various items of ladies clothing and the chaps did this for their wives and girlfriends. We continued on through the Red Sea, the Med, and eventually to Plymouth, where we anchored outside the harbour overnight. On our journey home from Aden, a couple of lads found down below, under the midships stores, a piece of plain black canvas about eight feet square. With the help of some white paint, they decided to design a ships' logo. Come the morning and we were called by the Bosun to stand by as the tug was coming alongside to take us into the Naval Base, this meant heading towards the Admiral's house before turning to port and passing quite close to his residence. As the tug arrived, two of the lads went aloft and pulled tight a line that had been put up there the night before with the result that there was a line from forward to aft and hanging from this line for all to see was a row of various ladies clothing, stockings, bras, suspenders and a variety of knickers of all sorts and, colours, and in the middle was our new Logo a black "flag" with the skull and crossbones with the title BARKERS BUCCANEERS.

One of the officers eventually saw this and tapped the Captain on the shoulder and when he turned round you could practically hear the scream from him and his face turned a bright red and all the sixty five of "Them down below" gave an almighty cheer, knowing that the Admiral would have seen it and wondered just what the hell was going on. We had eventually got him back and believe you me, revenge was sweet, when we paid off we all did so with a smile on our faces as we said goodbye ‘Skipper’. [Deckie]



...PIRACY OR LOOTING?

A remarkable incident took place off the south coast of Ireland during the closing phase of direct British influence in the island of Ireland. Remarkable in that it was an act of piracy (*or looting*).

The Anglo-Irish Treaty signed in London on 6th December 1921 brought into being the Provisional Government of Ireland with jurisdiction over the southern twenty six counties. The northern six counties, exercising their rights under the Treaty, remained as a self-governing part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. A direct result of this was the subsequent partition of the island into two distinct political, religious and geographical groups. The 'south', to be known as the Irish Free State with Dominion status, officially came into being exactly a year later replacing the Provisional Government in Irish politics. Although this avoided a north/south civil war, anti-Treaty elements within the Republican movement and the Irish Republican Army were unwilling to accept the terms of the Treaty principally, the likely partition of the country and the requirement for Free State politicians to swear an oath of allegiance to the Crown. This unwillingness eventually developed into outright hostilities and subsequently, a brutal civil war between the pro- (Free State) and anti- (IRA) treaty military and political elements which ranged throughout the Free State from 1922 – 1923.

As 1922 progressed, pro-Treaty members of the Army (later to be known as the Free State Army) who remained loyal to the Provisional Government in Dublin were increasingly subjected to

the same guerrilla style tactics that had proved so successful against British rule in the recent past. This was particularly true of the southern province of Munster and, though the capital city of Cork was in the main pro-Treaty, it was nevertheless firmly under the control of the IRA. Throughout the province IRA sympathy was wide spread and consequently, the writ of the Provisional Government virtually non-existent.

As in any war, arms, ammunition and information form an essential element. In this the Free State Army, formally established under the Treaty, were to enjoy a distinct advantage, namely that of British material and political support for the emergent new state. On the other hand, the anti-Treaty faction, notwithstanding an excellent system of intelligence gathering, found their traditional sources of material were generally no longer available to them. Consequently, faced with limited financial support and dwindling military resources, they were forced to rely on other localised means. Raids mounted against police stations, lightly manned military posts and the ambush of Free State patrols became their *modus operandi*. The *Upnor* incident was but an extension of this policy.



On 3rd April the Irish Correspondent of the New York Times filed a brief but detailed report of an incident of piracy which took place off the south coast of Ireland four days earlier. **[to be continued]** [Shane Redmond]



...calling all you Beira Patrollers

The RN/RFA Mozchan operation spanned 1966 to 1975, cost a great deal and involved, eg, with some 28 (17 wet and 11 dry) RFAs in support... someone must have a good tale or tales to tell us ... anonymity guaranteed.



RFA Pearleaf (liquids, possibly mail but no beer)



RFA Ennerdale (sorry but we had to mention this cavernous beast)



RFA Resurgent (noodles (well she used to be Changchow!)... Mars bars, beer, toilet paper and ammo for gunlines)



RFA Tidesurge (liquids (excluding beer))



Christmas lunch (cancelled)!

After some discussion we have decided to *cancel* our Christmas Lunch. With all the Government restrictions and difficulties in getting to the Admiralty Pub in Trafalgar Square it has been decided to cancel the event. We are disappointed with having to do this decision but Daily Orders call for common sense. We look forward to the event in 2021.



*will be
sold
cold!*

How to keep the beer ice-cold? This had them head-scratching at HM Naval Base Chatham when preparing for two-days of Navy Days in 1974. 42,000 cans of beer had been ordered. A spokesman (sorry 'spokesperson') said "How to serve the beer ice-cold to the 60,000 visitors expected was a problem. Solution – on arrival the cans will be loaded in the refrigerators of *RFA Stromness* and then *surviving cans* will transported as needed to the bars in an insulated van."

...good old RFA!

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