



THE NEWSLETTER

of the London and Home Counties Branch – June 2021

A recent PR posting by the Ministry of Defence, highlighted a RAS between an RFA and an RN vessel. Nothing unusual in this, except it was the first occasion that both vessels had female Commanding Officers. Women at sea is nowadays nothing unusual, and the RFA could be considered at being rather slow in this regard, as parts of the Merchant Navy have had women captains for some time. Of course, on passenger ships women have long been employed since steam replaced sail as stewards, hairdressers, etc. Cunard, which has had a female captain in I think, and I could be wrong as regards the vessel, the Queen Mary 2. A recent film of an American captain of a cruise liner, showed that the producers were more interested in showing the social aspects of her job rather than her professional seamanship role. She was called, in the film, "Captain Kate", and a lot of the film showed her socialising with passengers, especially children, I think it would be doubtful if a male captain would be showed in this in this way. Although if said captain had a beard, no doubt he would be compared to Captain Birds Eye.

However, let us stick with the military, which has had women at sea for the last 40 years, which as far as I am aware has been reasonably successful. Women have been going to sea for a several hundred years, albeit illicitly, usually for the comfort of the sailors, not for their fighting abilities. One such women, a seaman's wife on board the battleship *Tremendous* gave birth during

the battle of the 'Glorious First of June in 1794', her son was christened Daniel Tremendous Mackenzie. Employing the unreason of which only bureaucrats are capable, he got a medal and she was refused it on the grounds that she did not officially exist and could not, therefore, have been on the ship during the battle.

It is now 40 years since Wrens (as was) first went to sea in the RN, something that was not universally accepted by everyone. Demonstrations were held in Portsmouth by wives and partners of the male sailors on the ship, making it plain that as far as they were concerned these females were almost whores in uniform who were out to seduce their innocent partners.



"... my goodness sea person... if you keep this up... you'll be the envy of Popeye and his muscles ... speak to the Purser and she'll be able to get you a pipe and 'baccie..."

Needless to say, things have quietened down since then, and females are now an accepted part of the ship, indeed the RN could probably be unable

to put to sea in a lot of ships if it were not for women sailors.

As regards the RFA, were introduced some 30 years ago, and it seems that they were mostly accepted. However, the RN and the RFA have been used to male only ships, and it would be naive to expect a sudden change in the working environment to change overnight. Misogyny was, and probably still is, around the place, but no doubt the wiser ones will now probably keep it to themselves in case they are accused of some modern-day sexist crime.

I have experienced this myself, when I was a Second Officer in *Lyness*, a girl came on board in Portsmouth to see for herself what life was like in the RFA. After she had left the majority of the officers said that they were against employing women at sea, and I asked a couple of them why. There was no real argument, except that they couldn't handle large ropes and heavy lifts such as beer barrels something which, as I pointed out to the Chief Officer, he had not got involved in since his cadet days. One thing that used to be said when a woman was employed in an industry, was that the lads toned down their bad language, does this still apply??

I write this as someone who has never served at sea with women, and therefore I have been careful not to open myself to criticism in that I haven't a clue what I am writing about. So, if male or females with more recent experience would like to write in to The Newsletter, they would be more than welcome. Incognito misogynists would also be welcome, as long as they provide a name and address.

[Peter Harrison]

...NEWS FLASH...CANCELLED...

The Pineapple Pub - London is OPEN...

This means that our next meeting which will be our AGM will be held at The Pineapple on Wednesday **9th June** at 1200 and subject to the Government's Covid Rules and Regulations.

PINEAPPLE CANCELLED and AGM to be held ONLINE

A Happy Wanderer



“... The following should be read to the tune of ‘I love to go a-wondering, along the mountain track, and as I go, I love to sing, my knapsack on my back...Val-de-ri-Val-de-ra- ...”

When I left school at 15 I had no idea what I wanted to do but I did like travelling and experiencing different countries. My parents wisely directed me to Wray Castle in Ambleside and a couple of years later, like many from Wray Castle, I joined the RFA as a Radio Officer. A great decision as there was lots of travel involved. 34 years later that job came to an end but luckily the travelling didn't. Whilst the RFA had a lot of ships operating in the Far East there were far fewer sailing westwards. Now I had the opportunity to rectify this. After a decade exploring North America I started on the South and this brief note is about two of those adventures which overlapped.

The first to Argentina and Chile and the second from Chile to Bolivia. Basically travelling south on the Atlantic side and north on the Pacific side.

It's easy to get to Buenos Aires and worth a good look too but we wanted to head south. A long way south; in fact you can't get any further south anywhere apart from the Antarctic! We walked around the wonderful glacier at El Calafate, explored the Beagle Channel and settled in Ushuaia where the air is pure and the food is lamb.

This is a remote place and the views are vast. We drove over the border to Chile and toured the famous Tierra del Fuego National Park before settling into a posh estancia for a few days so we could climb the massif Torres del Paine. We had the benefit of a guide and eventually made it to the base of the three peaks. Las Torres del Paine has 3 very recognisable peaks and sits at the southernmost point of the Andes and whilst this was fun we were yet again breathing the thin air that you suffer at about 9,000 feet. Chile is a beautiful country, relatively well managed and easy to explore and very very picturesque. After this we enjoyed an easy journey north to the capital Santiago and then, on the next visit the following year, we continued north again to the Atacama desert, a 900 mile strip of desert about 7,000 feet in altitude.

This is the driest desert in the world and some parts of it have not seen rain in the last 400 years. Very unlike Ambleside where you normally get rain every 400 minutes. The Atacama Desert isn't large by desert standards but it's a great place to see this extreme landscape which supposedly resembles the moon's surface and used to train astronauts – so they say.

Then we left the Chilean border and presumably drove over no-man's land until about 20 miles later when we arrived at the Bolivian frontier. Onwards and northwards to the Uyuni Salt Plains a mere 4,000 square miles of white, and it is pure white everywhere you look. With extra fuel tanks on the roof we set off on a compass bearing! No roads just

NNE and keep going as far as the eye could see. Its uncanny you can't help worrying that you are actually driving over ice and it might crack. It wont of course because its salt and you have to keep telling yourself this.



Uyuni Salt Plains with our driver and guide



Glacia at El Calafate



Bolivian frontier - not quite what HomeSec Ms Patel wants for border control.

These Salt plains have become a source of wealth for Bolivia, not just the salt but the more valuable lithium that we use in batteries for everything from phones to cars. Not surprisingly we were booked into a salt hotel. That is a hotel that is built using salt bricks, basic salt furniture and salt statues to decorate it with. Luckily there wasn't too much in the food.

At this point we tried the local bus service all the way to La Paz and then by easier means to Peru, Paraguay, Brazil and home – but that's another story. [Frank Andrews]



Life after the RFA...

Part 7 – Seoul (continued)...

The HASH was good, it was made up of expatriate men working in Seoul and included embassy staff. Two members were selected to organise a run in the country side, sort of a paper chase. At the end of the run there was a bonfire and the odd beer or two or three to quench the thirst. Once or twice a year the run would be held at the weekend and the wives invited. A mini marathon was organised every other year. The women even started up their own HASH. Only embassy staff could use the American PX but we did manage to join the UN Sergeants Mess which provided a pleasant break. The British football team would play matches against local teams but once a year they would play against a team from the HASH.

The British Embassy was a source of information not just about other expatriates but also information on the political situation which was changing. The tension increased and curfew was

strengthened. When I first arrived, it was midnight to 4am after the death of the President the curfew went from 10pm to 6pm. Before this they tolerated expatriates being out after midnight. But with the increase in the curfew this toleration was no longer accepted.



The Mark One Hairy Ferguson

Once a year the Embassy would organise a trip to the border – the DMZ. During the Korean war the Gloucester Regiment had been tasked to keep one of the passes into Seoul closed to stop the North Korean forces entering South Korea. The capital Seoul, was about fifty miles from the border. They were successful in holding it for longer than requested. When eventually they pulled out they received several casualties. Each year the Embassy would hold a service at the place that the Regiment had held. As it was close to the DMZ which was still being defended by South Korean and US troops, the Embassy had to obtain permission from the South Korean Government. This required the names of all British people that would attend. We put our names down and car number, then led by the Ambassador who was accompanied by the Military Attaché, our cavalcade drove within a few miles, of the border – the DMZ.

To be continued [Colin Spencer]

Personalities 'Captain C S B Irwin DSO, DSC RD RNR'

In our April edition Peter referred to his time standing by the building of AHT01 – Engadine – and her interesting Master.

Captain Charles Stuart Bonshaw Irwin DSO, DSC, RD RNR was born in India in May 1915, was educated at the Nautical College, Pangbourne. During the Second World War he served with the Royal Naval Reserve in home waters, the Atlantic, Mediterranean and Far East. In the light cruiser *HMS Cardiff* he was off Saint-Valery-en-Caux when in June 1940 the Navy covered the retreat and evacuation of the 51st Highland Division. He was awarded the DSC for his part as Senior Officer 7th Motor Launch Flotilla and CO of *ML270* in the hazardous intelligence-led Operation Chariot. This was the one-way, March 1942, raid on Saint-Nazaire that implanted the old destroyer *Campbeltown* into the dry dock gates. Of the 18 coastal craft assigned to the raid only 4 returned. In 1944 he gained the DSO for special operations at sea in the Mediterranean and Adriatic. Early 1945 attached *HMS Braganza* (RN Base, Bombay) for what is described as 'miscellaneous services'.

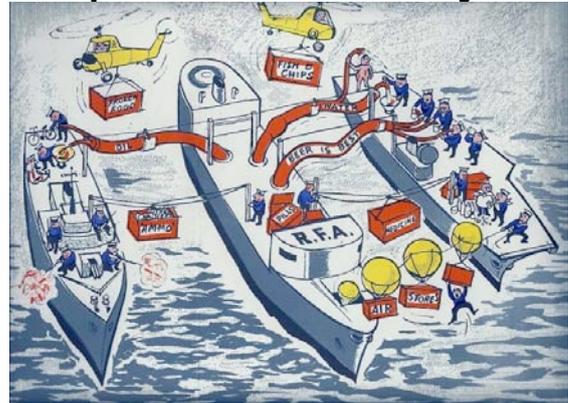


In October 1950 joined RFA as a Second Officer, November 1951 appointed Chief Officer serving in *Wave Sovereign* off Korea in 1953 and 1954. He was appointed Master in March

1964 and has commanded Fort, Leaf, Ranger, Tide and Improved Tide vessels, *RFA Reliant*, *RFA Sir Percivale*, October 1967 first master of *RFA Engadine*. His final command until retirement in September 1973 was *RFA Grey Rover*.

Captain Irwin's hobbies were given as music, photography and model making. He was also a keen fencer and lived in Littlehampton, Sussex and near Boston, Lincs.

Statistics from RFA Tidespring in Operations Paraquat and Corporate : March to July 1982



We have had over a year of information from politicians, medics and scientists, but it has been the statisticians who were worth listening to.

- Warfare
 - In Zone – 83 days (104 active)
 - Closed up at action station – 27 days
 - Defence watches – 43 days
- Aviation
 - Operational aircraft – 4 Wessex 5 (2 + 2 replacements)
 - Losses – 3
 - Landings – 286
 - Outward loads – 1,000
- Replenishment Ops (surface) – 116
 - Ammunition – 145 tons
 - Fuel issued – 13,300 tons (approx 3,000,000galls)
 - Lubricating oils – 6,800 galls
 - Fresh water production – 1,508 tons

(338,000 galls)

- Internal
Radio traffic – 2,640 signals
Meals – 26,000
Fuel consumption (main plant) – 2,000 tons (500,000 galls)
Complement – 114 officers & ratings (excluding aircrew)
Extra personnel – Flight 17, 'M' Coy 45 Commando, 12 SAS (ASI to South Georgia), 7 RMs (ex Antrim (South Georgia to ASI), POWS etc 187
- Casualties – Nil
[Shane Redmond]

...more memories of a commercial caper on the high seas

I was an Apprentice with Cunard at the time and was appointed to a refrigerated ship called the *Port Melbourne*. We sailed from the UK with cargo for South Africa. On discharge in Cape Town, Durban and Port Elizabeth we re-painted the funnel in the colours of SAF Marine and re-registered the ship in Cape Town. We then sailed for Beira. Approaching the port we were approached by a frigate and called up however, when they saw that we were 'South African' they moved off although it must have been obvious that we were a Port line ship. In Beira we loaded tobacco, clearly marked 'Produce of Rhodesia' for discharge in Australia. After discharge in Sydney we re-painted the funnel back in Cunard colours and re-registered in London before loading for the UK.

The thing I most remember was the smell of the tobacco and how we spent days cleaning the holds after discharge before we were passed to load lamb.
[Philip Hanton]



In a sea of sand and rocks

Did you serve upon SIR LANCELOT or STROMNESS supporting the Sultan of Oman's armed forces? You may be interested in a book written by Stewart Wilson. His book '**Dhofar Voices**' Frontier Force, Oman – its life and times 1970-1980'.

In his foreword, Marshal of the RAF The Lord Stirrup describes Oman in the 1970s in many respects a medieval country with only three schools and two hospitals. So what were RFAs *Sir Lancelot* and *Stromness* doing off this part of the Arabian Peninsula in 1973/74? Did you serve on either of them at this time?

Then this hardback 364-page book, heavily illustrated with maps and aerial images, may be of interest to you. Priced at £35.00 plus £12.00 P&P. If you're interested, in the first instance, please contact Stewart Wilson at: dhofarvoices@gmail.com.



The meeting of Perception and Reality ...is this really the end of 'lockdown'?



rfaa.london@gmail.com

<https://www.rfaa-london.org.uk>

17th edition : June 2021

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