



THE NEWSLETTER

of the London and Home Counties Branch – July 2021

I recently decided that I have too many books and some must go to the tip, where other people can have the opportunity to read them. In London and in other cities one can dump them outside on the pavement for passers by to take them as they wish. Among them was Nicholls's Seamanship and Nautical Knowledge, Admiralty manuals of Seamanship volumes 1 to 4, and various navigation books. Looking through them makes one realise that Seamanship covers vast range of subjects from meteorology to loading containers. However, one aspect that is not written down, and that is ship handling, something that is very important, but cannot be realistically be trained for. Nowadays ships officers can be trained with simulators, something the airline industry has had for a very long time. And yet simulators can only go so far, as was shown in the disappearance of the Air France airline over the Atlantic Ocean in 2009. There the pitot tubes, which measure the air speed, froze up and the computer, not knowing what was going on, switched off the auto pilot and handed back control to the brains, i.e. the pilots. So, you have an aircraft which is perfectly flyable and apart from the speed measurement everything was working normally. However, the pilots did not see it this way, and for whatever reason decided to pull back on the control column which resulted in the aircraft going into a stall. Despite stall warnings going off, they continued to keep the nose up which meant the aircraft

virtually stopped flying, or at least in a forward direction. Now as everyone who has ever read Biggles knows when you have a stall you put the nose down, increase speed and come out of the stall. At the subsequent enquiry Air France said that they would introduce better training in basic airmanship, which begs the question as to what sort of training did they have before? Now luckily at sea if your engine or the auto pilot fails, it is not usually so catastrophic, but are sailors trained on computers any better than those poor pilots. Most merchant navy officers do not really do much ship handling, as it is usually done by the pilot in the port area, although in theory it is "to masters orders and pilot's advice". Some such as ferries do a lot of ship handling but deep-sea sailors not so much, but in the RN and the RFA ship handling is a prerequisite but here it is not so much in simulators, as practicing in the real environment. When I was growing up, we lived next door to an RN commander who was at that time in command of a destroyer *HMS Carron*. I remember him telling me that when they went into Grand Harbour in Malta, to reverse into the creeks it was virtually mandatory, because everyone watching, to go full astern and then full ahead to stop right by the mooring buoys, anything less was for wimps or for small children. Now of course MN officers do not have the luxury of being able to play around in the ocean, even if they wanted to, as their task is to go from A-to-B in the quickest possible time. There is an

Admiralty BR book called 'Collisions and Groundings', which goes into great detail about RN and RFA vessels coming amok for various reasons, some dating from before the Second World War. Some are bad luck, but others such as one CO ignoring pilot's advice and sailing with 2 inches of clearance underneath. It made interesting reading during long watches such as crossing the Pacific Ocean, and reading about poor ship handling proving that however skilled you may think you are the sea can always catch you out. One thing to me when reading it, was to hope that I would never turn up in its pages. When doing a RNR stint in a frigate some years after having left the RFA, my worst fears were confirmed, and I am in the book!! [Peter Harrison]

Ed: When Christopher Hitchens reportedly said "Everyone has a book in them..." we don't think he meant getting into the Collisions and Groundings BR.



"... as any old Sparks will tell you Morse Code is like riding a bike ...one never forgets it's just one's ability to handle it that slows down.

maintenance period there which meant a decent stint alongside. We had four Deck Cadets aboard at that time who were all very keen and eager to learn and to visit foreign parts was an added bonus for them. The Old Man had impressed upon them that they were to make the most of our extended stay in Trieste and that they were to take the opportunity to visit places of interest ashore and not to just frequent the local bars! Perish the thought!

Taking his advice to heart, the Cadets decided that it would be a JGI (jolly good idea) to go even further afield than Trieste itself and for some reason they settled upon visiting the city of Ljubljana for a 72-hours visit. Now – Ljubljana is the capital of Slovenia and was about a 4 hour train ride from Trieste. When they approached the Chief Officer to ask his permission for this, he nearly had cardiac arrest at the mere thought of them wandering around in a foreign land on their own, getting up to all sorts of who-knows-what and ending up in serious trouble. He naturally refused their request. At the time I was teaching them the Morse Code, making them learn all the letters and numbers and once they had accomplished that, we would have practical sessions, with half of them at the after end of the bridge deck flashing to the other half who were at the forward end of the aft accommodation – the flashing let me hasten to stress involved them using the ship's Aldis lamps to send messages back and forth and did not mean them dropping their trousers!

Anyway, they came bleating to me about not being able to (in their words) fulfil the Captain's instructions about visiting interesting places. I jokingly told them to go back to the Chief Officer and to tell him that I would be happy to volunteer to chaperone them on their desired trip. Well the next thing I knew, I was being summonsed to the Choff's Office where he laid out various criteria

My Ljubljana Experience

In early 1994 RFA *Olwen* was part of NAVOCFORMED during which we had some really enjoyable times aboard and some great port visits, one of which was Trieste. We were programmed for a

which would have to be complied with if he was to grant his permission for the trip to go ahead. This encompassed things like me ensuring that the Cadets had in-date passports, could pay their train fares without any hassle, had an adequate supply of cash with them to last the duration of the trip, the timings of travel arrangements and a contact telephone number and address of the hotel we planned to stay in. I was also charged to make sure that we all stayed together at all times and that they were to be on their very best behaviour too.



Having made all the necessary arrangements and having satisfied the Choff that all of his instructions would be complied with, we duly packed our kit and headed for Trieste Station to board our train. As we were all English and had short hair we did not want anyone to think we had any connection at all with the Forces, we had to come up with some feasible excuse for our trip in case any of the authorities asked questions when we crossed the border and showed our passports. I think we decided that I was a teacher and that they were my students and that we were on a Field Trip ! Suffice to say that we had a really lovely time in Ljubljana with a good hotel very central to the local places of interest. Ljubljana is a beautiful city and most of the locals spoke excellent English so there were no language difficulties at all. One of the places we visited was the local Castle where we could climb up these very

steep (and very high) steps to the battlements which gave a fantastic view of the city – well all but one of us experienced this as one particular chap (hello Captain) took one look at the steps and cried off owing to vertigo. The weather was great for our visit and the food was really cheap too. We experienced no problems at all during our visit and went back to the ship with some wonderful memories.

The day after our return I was Duty Officer and one of the AB's – a real sea-lawyer type who thought he knew everything about everything – asked me where the Cadets and I had been for the weekend and I explained that we had been on a cultural visit to Slovenia. He asked me who had paid for the trip and I told him that I had got the money out of the ship's Amenities Fund. Well - that was like lighting a fuse under him and he went off on one, imparting to me in no uncertain and quite flowery language telling me that if it was good enough for the Officers then it should be good enough for the Crew too and off he stormed to the Choff's Office to make a complaint and to ask why this sort of trip had not been advertised as being open for the Crew too.

That resulted in yet another tannoy announcement bidding me to present myself at the Choff's Office forthwith (if not sooner). [Yarpie]



Life after the RFA...

Part 8 – Seoul (continued)...

Accompanied by the Military Attaché, our cavalcade drove within a few miles, of the border – the DMZ. This drive itself was very pleasant and relaxed, that is to say that as we neared

the DMZ we were met by a rather large US tank, with a large gun pointing at us. The tank kindly trundled off the road so that we could pass. The Americans were quite cheerful, waving and calling. When we reached the site where the Service was to be held we could clearly see North Korea and one could faintly hear the North Koreans shouting and gesticulating at us. The Service was followed by the Military Attaché explaining the events leading up to Gloucesters defence of the pass and their withdrawal. We were taken to the hill the Gloucesters had had to defend and climbed it carrying a small rucksack and followed the Gloucester's route, for a short distance, that they had used as they withdrew that night, with all their equipment under war conditions after holding the pass for several days. We did it on a nice warm sunny day with no bags under no stress and they struggled.



There is still is stress on the DMZ, several years ago they had found that North Korea was digging a tunnel under it. A tunnel big enough to take tanks. After our visit to the DMZ area I could understand, a little, of the stress. One evening we were with friends having dinner and the odd glass of wine / beer! We discussed what they would do in the event that the invasion began. Several suggestions were floated, the only one I can remember was a marine one. We had one MN Captain and two Chief Engineers, perhaps we could 'borrow' a boat and sail over to Japan. A second solution seemed more logical, we lived near the Swedish Embassy, they could

always climb the wall into their grounds. Driving south was another idea, but there would have been a large number of people doing the same. Besides some of the motorway south was used as an emergency runway for military aircraft. The last solution that evening was to have another drink!

One of the British Bank managers was a Scot. He and his fellow Scots organised a St. Andrew's night (on a Saturday) each year, this would be held in one of the international hotels. A Scot could host a table which could contain other nationalities, but non-Scots could not host a table. The host was responsible for the drink on his table with an added responsibility of bringing a bottle of good Scotch, usually the guests brought a bottle of Scotch as well. After the meal there was dancing, that is to say Scottish Country Dancing. However, the Manager in conjunction with the British Embassy would organise Scottish Country Dancing lessons at the Embassy which could be attended by those people that were going to the St Andrews night. Strangely enough everyone the Scots and the non-Scots thoroughly enjoyed the dancing, particularly once they knew the steps and after several glasses of Whisky, Drambuie etc. There was one problem, the curfew. Once the change in the curfew was introduced it meant that the dance had to start before 10 pm and finish after 6am.



In itself this was no major problem, but the British football team would challenge the HASH to a game of football in the morning (10am) after the dance! Apart from the hangovers, further complications were introduced, the referee had additional powers. In the centre of the pitch they would place four cases of beer. When an infringement was made the offender would have to drink a can of beer. If someone scored a goal not only the scorer but the goal keeper would have to drink a can of beer. The two teams retired to the Sergeants Mess where they met up with their wives for 'lunch', hamburger, chips and beer. Everyone going home by 4pm. There was work the next day!!



Sport, they had the HASH and there was some possibility to play tennis, but rather limited. In winter with sub zero temperatures, ice skating was a possibility. A paddy field would be flooded with water and the next day it would be frozen over. You had to be able to navigate through the rice reeds. The other problem was stopping, this was solved by falling face down in the snow on the side of the rice field. Another idea was cricket, there was a field they could use and there was some basic equipment, they managed to play in the summer – occasionally. It was a mixed match Men v Ladies. One of the younger wives use to wear a pair of short shorts. I could never understand why the slip fielders fielded on the leg side and not the off side when she was

batting, they wouldn't see the ball to catch it, if she had touched it, would they?

In addition, darts was introduced. Teams were established, the matches were held in our homes or clubs. Not quite up to the level that one sees nowadays on television, nevertheless very enjoyable. It was possible to have an occasional evening for dancing, not Scottish Country dancing, to help to reduce the tension. This went down quite well with the expatriate community. The wives arranged the food and the men served the drink on the day. It had been possible to organise a meeting room for this event, a husband had to take it in turn to dance while the others looked after the bar. Sometimes American beer and wine could be bought in some of the local shops. When the wives heard about this, they would arrange a car with their husband for shopping. These evenings were very enjoyable, as they would end after curfew, when it was midnight, the husband had to drive home. Naturally these evenings were not held when the curfew ended at 6am. **To be concluded** [Colin Spencer]



“... you've heard of the Epsom Derby well the London Branch 'Epsom BBQ' is still on track for Saturday 17 July...”



“Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery”
-- Oscar Wilde --



Zeebrugge 28 May – The tugs *de WASP* and *de ZEEMEEUW* and the sailing vessel *ZENOBE GRAMME* officially changed their flag.

The creation of this new ensign dated back to October 2018 when the Belgium Navy was looking for an ‘innovative’ way to take civilian crew members on board for operations. Under the new colours (a Blue Ensign) a mixed civilian-military crew can sail. This means that Belgium’s auxiliary vessels are no longer warships. Owned or operated or chartered solely by the Ministry of National Defence for non-commercial government service – but still enjoying sovereign immunity.

A Belgium news release indicated that ‘their concept was based on the ‘British RFA’ statute’ (*sic*).

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This 11ft x 30 inch model is made of copper and weighs 70kg. Trinity Marine says it was used by Qinetiq to assess the ship’s RCS. However, she is not a Ness boat as we knew them as she has two satellite coms terminals and is fitted with Chaff rocket launchers.

rfaa.london@gmail.com
<https://www.rfaa-london.org.uk>
18th edition : July 2021
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