



THE NEWSLETTER

of the London and Home Counties Branch – August 2021

There has been some exchange of views on social media regarding the news that when the new Royal Navy Personal Clothing System (RNPCS) uniform is issued next year for the Royal Navy and the RFA there will be only one flag on it and that will be the white ensign. Now it maybe that the MOD have seen a way of reducing costs and concluded that by having a standard flag, they can save £500 per year. Alternatively, for those with suspicious minds, it is proof that this is part of a hidden agenda to assimilate the RFA into the RN, certainly that is what is being said in the bazaars. But without being in the organisation, it is difficult to know how this is being received by the lads and lasses in the ships, but it does appear that it is one step closer to bringing the RFA into the RN. This amalgamation has been going on since the Falklands War, when it subsequently became clear that the method of operating RFA's in a war had left a lot to be desired. Those of us in the service in the 1960's and 70's had a rather peaceful and calm time, and playing cowboys and Indians (sorry native Americans) like the Thursday War at Portland did not really prepare us for any real type of conflict. Now this is not to suggest any denigration of the RFA at that time, we did our job very well, better than anyone else, but it was really a merchant navy company whose vessels happened to be painted grey and with a number on the side. Since the War, RFA's have been upgraded to be more like warships in their damage

control, firefighting, communications, and of course equipped with defensive weapons. Of course, this does require the personnel to use the equipment, something that was absent in my time. So training is now closely integrated with the RN starting off at Dartmouth, and going on to do periods as a PWO on destroyers and frigates, and prospective commanding officers have to do a CO's course before they can drive a front line RFA. In my time shore jobs were mainly confined to engineers as superintendents, nowadays there appear to be more ashore than on the ships.



Bo'sun ...OOD here - the Old Man wishes to go back to the good old RFA days... so before we enter HM Dockyard ...can you ensure there is more 'rusty-brown' paint on the outboard side.

Despite all this, the crews are still merchant navy, and no matter how many jobs you do as a PWO in a warship, to take command of an RFA you must have a Class 1 certificate (Master's certificate in old money). Articles in the Naval Review have discussed this proposal for the RN to

take over the RFA, but as one officer wrote: *'the RFA does a very good job, and does it better than we are likely to be able to do it. Let us keep our hands off, and let them get on with it'*. However, surely the real problem is the terms of service, and how would the maritime unions react to their members being commanded by naval personnel and presumably losing all their merchant navy benefits. Would officers be able to have their 180 days leave per year, or being able to leave the service when giving three months' notice? And in any case, they are still merchant ships with a port of registry on the back end, and therefore they will obviously have to be really de-registered. This is something that has been talked about for a long time, but nothing seems to have happened.



Bo'sun! ...tell Choff Sorry... it was my 'new naval sword' that cut a hole in his fuelling hose... Purser may have a puncture kit.

When I was in Nigeria, British Caledonian Airways was taken over by British Airways, and the resulting chaos caused a lot of resentment. The general manager of BCal was a friend and he was telling me about the different terms of service for pilots, and because BCal's were better than BA's, naturally the BCal pilots were not prepared to give them up. So to start with you had a BA captain earning less than an ex-BCal first officer, and it took couple of years to sort it out. Now that was relatively simple compared to what we are discussing, but the airline industry at that time had plenty of jobs going, so the pilots could, and did, go elsewhere. The personnel of the British merchant navy do not at present have the luxury of plenty of other jobs to go to, indeed the RFA is the biggest employer of British registered seafarers. But perhaps this is an academic discussion, because maybe all the RFA personnel are more than happy to join the RN, which begs the question, why didn't they join it in the first place. And maybe it is also academic, like this article, because it probably will not happen any time soon, if at all. Discuss. [Peter Harrison]

The Press Gang: This has not been going on since the Falklands but since then it has certainly risen further up the in-tray. It is an old cherry that like a 'Jack-in-the-box' has raised its head over the decades however, it has always proven to be more economic to run what are in effect 'cargo ships not on commercial service' with civilian qualified seafarers. One only has to look at the physical size of some RFAs and the surprisingly small crews that run them. The 39,000 tonne new Tide tankers with 63 + up to 46 RN when flight embarked, the new 5,700 tonne Type 31 frigates with a 'smart' complement of 100+.

However, put your emotions aside and remember that the RFA has always

successfully operated multi-manned ships – since 1905 with *RFA Maine* – ship driven and engineered by RFA seafarers and her operational hospital ship role run by the RN, just like *RFA Argus* today. In 1912 the repair ship *RFA Reliance* was crewed in a similar way as *RFA Diligence* sadly now fading away in Portsmouth Naval Base.

In practice *HMS Olna* – the only naval-crewed British tanker – 300 – then after being Lloyd’s classified and doing the same task as an RFA – 113 personnel; also take *RFA Tide Austral* – 90 personnel – as the naval crew *HMAS Supply* – 206 personnel; the tanker *RFA Appleleaf* – 60 as *HMAS Westralia* doing same task – 96 personnel. More recently *RFA Largs Bay* – around 70 personnel as *HMAS Choules* – 158.

And this all before the legal-beavers explore the issues of surrounding non-combatant ships with personnel covered under the Armed Force Act and Geneva Conventions. Recognising that some countries commissioned and commercial ships wear the same ensign. However, we do not - how would it appear that a non-commissioned ship was crewed by personnel under the flag of commissioned ships? The Privateer comes to mind. [Ed]



Not on your Nellie!

Some years ago while the civil war was raging in Sierra Leone *Argus* was part of a group of ships despatched to anchor off Freetown in a “show of British strength and commitment” in that area and for a few days we laid on various demonstrations, including storming a beach to land fully-equipped troops just to prove to the locals what we could actually achieve very quickly and the whole thing was very impressive too. Each day we were surrounded by the

local bumboats which contained loads of fresh fruit, wooden carvings of animals and some fearsome-looking masks too which the locals were offering to the ships’ companies at ridiculously cheap prices. Some of these carvings were really beautiful too. Anyway, one of our cadets purchased various accoutrements to take home as gifts for friends and family, one of which was a fairly large carved pachyderm which was promptly named *Nellie*. Everyone was informed to be very careful about purchasing wooden articles as they could possibly contain woodworm! I kept on winding the cadet up about the dangers of woodworm infestation of his cabin and how his bunk could be destroyed by these creatures quite quickly and he became quite paranoid about checking for any signs at all of woodworm. One day I went down to the Chippy’s shop and gathered a small quantity of some wooden shavings that I broke up into very small bits. I then went to his cabin – he was on watch at the time – and moved *Nellie* from where she was standing on the deck of his cabin and laid her on her side a couple of feet away and laid a trail of these bits of wooden shavings and some dust too from where *Nellie* had originally been standing to her present position in the hope of just alerting the cadet. Well – he obviously went to his cabin after his watch, saw poor *Nellie* lying prone on the deck and promptly decided that the woodworms were terribly active in the area. To combat this alarming situation he gathered *Nellie*, the shavings, etc and hastened outside and chucked *Nellie et al* overboard. I felt really guilty and decided not to tell him it was all meant as a joke as he would perhaps not have seen the funny side of things. Fortunately it was only *Nellie* that went for a swim and not any other of the carvings he had bought! [Yarpie]



“... it’s disappointing that he will not be joining us ... it’s over excitement with an RT deal ... Covid cure and soda consumption ... you forgot to switch that fantastic camera’s microphone on Comrade ... it would have been a great ... even greater ...the greatest story ever!!!”



Life after the RFA...

Part 9 – Seoul (continued)...

On another occasion one of our friends from Cape Town did the ‘cooking’. The poor chicken was rather over cooked and looked rather black. It so happened that the Scottish piper was still in Korea and so was invited to the dinner, complete with pipes. At midnight he played his pipes standing on the wall around the house [*see **Ed**]. We didn’t hear what the local population thought but certainly several lights came on.

This seems to address our social side and little mention of work.

My work was different and could be complicated. The technical side was very interesting. It is not often one sees

a ship badly damaged. The ship, a bulk carrier, had been in collision with a container ship. The bulk carrier was fully loaded, the container ship hit on the bulkhead between No 3 and 4 hold and penetrated as far as the hatch coaming. Basic temporary repairs had to be conducted for the ship to proceed to a nearby safe port where temporary repairs could be started to allow the ship to go to another port further away where more repairs could be done to enable the vessel to proceed eventually to Japan and drydock.



The same damage viewed from different sides of the bulkhead.

There was another interesting job. The demand for larger container ships was increasing. One owner had three sister vessels of 2,000 TEU and needed greater capacity. In order to meet those demands pending new construction a quick solution was to insert a 44m midship section into each vessel, enlarging them to 2,500 TEU. A section was fabricated before the ship arrived. The ship docked and cut in two. The dock was flooded and the two sections pulled apart and the new section floated into position. Once aligned the three sections were pulled together, secured and the dock emptied. With the three sections on the blocks the sections were then welded together. A new bulbous bow section was also fitted. It took about two months for each ship, excluding the fabrication time.

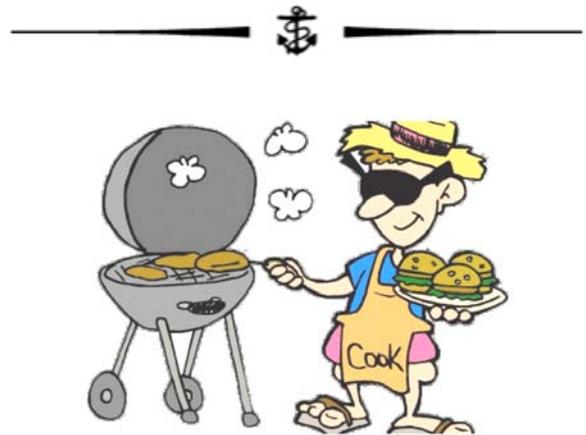


A new section being fabricated as the drydock was widened. The new section

being slid into place and new bow section being fitted.

Less glamorous was a log carrier that arrived full of logs. The ship was duly anchored and the logs dumped into the sea around the ship. I had the pleasure of attending that ship in connection with machinery surveys. There was no clear run to the gangway so it meant a 20m walk, jumping from log-to-log to the gangway, hence no photos. It certainly made life interesting. **To be concluded** [Colin Spencer]

***Ed** : is this wailing on the wall?



“... well the Epsom Derby
...ooooops sorry ... we mean the
London Branch ‘Epsom BBQ’ was
held on Saturday 17 July...”





This was our first get together for over a year and half ... a handful of us gathered ... we are all a little older, a little greyer and some of us somewhat heavier ... double jabbed and well.

The weather was super kind ... actually for some of us too hot with chilled melon and sunhats abound. Our very sincere thanks to Bob Nichols for hosting us in his magnificent garden.



Diary dates

These are intended to proceed unless we are informed otherwise

- Merchant Navy Day, Tower Hill : Sunday 5th September
- Remembrance Day, Whitehall and Tower Hill : Sunday 7th November
- Christmas Lunch (Admiralty Pub) Wednesday 8th December



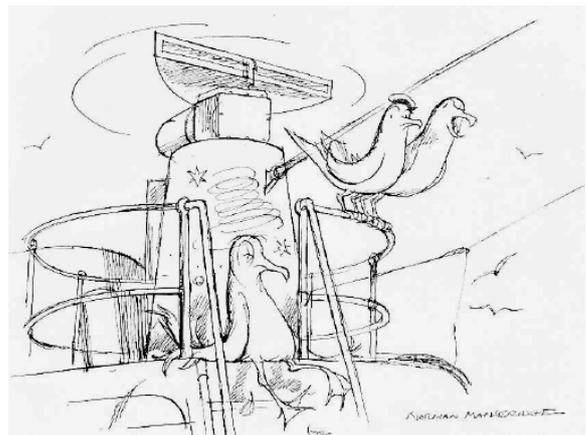
A calm sea and following wind

Sadly we have to record that the following Branch members have crossed the bar

Tom St.John Coleman
Michael Donnelly



The Marconi Heritage Group have told us that the company's journal '**Mariner**' – which included details of sea-going and shore-based personnel from 1947 onwards – has been scanned and available online as PDFs from: <https://themarconifamily.pbworks.com/w/page/85274935/Catalogues%20and%20Journals>



“... look at Hancock there ... and let it be an lesson to you lad - when avoiding those cameras never alight on a radar scanner...”

As lockdown ends? Under our current plans this will be our last monthly edition – we will be going quarterly.

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18th edition : August 2021

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

