



THE NEWSLETTER

of the London and Home Counties Branch

Why does anyone want to go to sea? As Samuel Johnson said in 1759 *“being in a ship is being in a jail with the chance of being drowned”*. In the 1930’s to the 1960’s the United States and Royal navies used the slogan *“join the navy and see the world”*. Perhaps the reality of life at sea for some of those recruits was the 1936 film *Follow the Fleet* in which Fred Astaire sang the lyrics: *“and what did we see, we saw the sea”*. Of course, in those days, unlike now, foreign travel was virtually non-existent for most British people, or at least if they were not relatively well off. So, whilst this was an RN and USN slogan, it would have equally applied to the merchant navy, in fact more so in some shipping lines. Was this a big reason for going to sea, possibly it was, and maybe still is, but I can only speak for myself, that it was not a major reason for me.



RUN AWAY TO SEA
BY

The RFA in 1964 when I joined had about 45 ships and following the Navy it was spread around the world. My first ship *Wave Baron* spent ten months based in Malta, a lot of the time tied up alongside. Whilst it was good for parties, notably with the Wrens from the Comcen in Lascaris, we didn’t go out of the Mediterranean which was a bit frustrating for me, but as the Second Officer said to me at that time, I will look back on those days wistfully, (He was correct). For a lot of my erstwhile compatriots at the School of Navigation Warsash they joined lines such as P & O, Shaw Savill, New Zealand Shipping, Clan Line, etc and other general cargo and liner companies which operated to Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and the Far East. The officers spent a lot of time on these coasts before returning to UK, so they did see a lot of the world, and their girls. In 1963 the British merchant navy had about 120,000 officers and ratings and a reasonable proportion of the worlds shipping, albeit it was steadily declining.

The number, in 2019, been reduced to about 22,000, of which the RFA employs 2,100, or nearly 10%. So, does anyone join to see the world? If they do, most are likely to be disappointed, as container ships, tankers, and even cruise liners spend little more than 24 hours in port. Obviously, they do not have much time to go ashore and have fun so if they only see the sea, or the end of a pipeline why would they join? Clearly, I cannot speak on their behalf so if any of them read this, maybe they

can explain. Presumably money comes way up the list, although nobody has ever gone to sea to make a fortune, unless you were a pirate in the 17th to 19th centuries. Still guys and girls, whatever the reason, enjoy, because for most of the time, or at least in the RFA, it is worthwhile. [Peter Harrison]



... invited guests at sea (Wives)

My last Leaf Boat was *RFA Bayleaf* and it involved a flight by RAF Transport Command to Singapore. However, this time, I arrived about two days before the ship. What a pleasant surprise. It happened that my first Chief Engineer, now one of the Superintendents, was in Singapore at the same time. I believe he was there for another ship and as the *Bayleaf* was arriving he went on board. There were no crankshaft troubles or bearing troubles or boiler troubles. The only problem was the main engine exhaust line. One of the expansion bellows had cracked allowing exhaust gas and soot to pour into the top of the engine room – painting everything a nice shade of black.



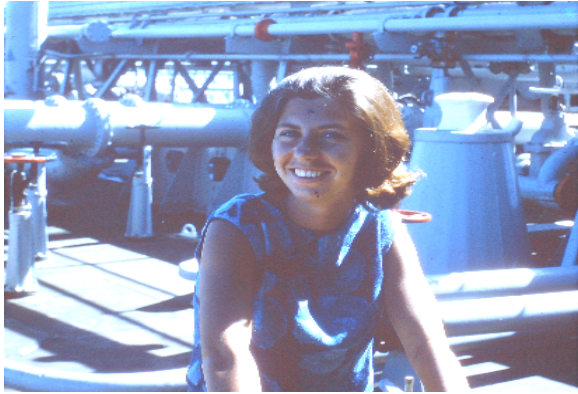
In Singapore, we received a circular saying the Chief Officers and Second Engineers could have their wives join the ship. I had been married a couple of months before I joined the *Bayleaf*, so I sent a letter to my wife, Dorothy, asking if she would like to sail on the ship. I tried to explain all the difficulties, such as she would be the only woman on

board and she would be bored, watch keeping etc. Dorothy said, YES! I think the ship discharged in Plymouth and went to drydock in Swansea. On arrival there I managed a long weekend and met my wife and we joined *Bayleaf*.

Ten days later we sailed, bound for Aden. As Second, I was on the 4 to 8 watch. This meant that bedtime was about 21.30 then at 0320 someone was knocking on my door to wake me to go on watch at 0400. I would be back in the cabin by 0815, shower and change then breakfast. As Second most of the morning was taken up with work. The afternoon was spent catching up on sleep before going down the engine room to take over the watch at 1600. As I was on watch during dinner at 1830, it was taken in the Engineers Office by the Engine Room and Dorothy would join me for dinner. After the watch was over a shower and a cold beer, some evenings there would be a film show. A new Junior Engineer had joined the ship in Swansea, his first trip to sea. He and Dorothy were a little apprehensive about crossing the Bay of Biscay. Dorothy was ok but the young engineer with the smells of the machinery found it a long crossing.

Once in the Med and the warm weather what is there for your wife to do, particularly with everyone on watch or sleeping except in the mornings. One of the first jobs Dorothy tried was steering, but after about twenty minutes it was decided that this was not the job for her. She would add another day to the voyage as we zigged around the ocean! Ballast was being moved around so Dorothy helped but found the valves were a little difficult to turn quickly. The next job that came up was the Bar Chits and this worked perfectly. Crossing the Med proved very uneventful and arrival at Port Said was quite exciting. Can we go ashore? Sadly, no as we joined the convoy transiting the canal and shortly was on the move. Once clear of Port

Said there is little to see, so it was back to the cabin for Dorothy and additional watch keeping for me. Soon we were passing through the Bitter Lakes and a few hours later we were into the Red Sea. Aden was a few days away with a chance to go ashore.



Operating the tank valves

Our first stop was Little Aden to load for Singapore. We managed to go ashore shopping. After an hour wandering around, we stopped for a spot of lunch. An enjoyable meal which was interrupted by a very loud bang. Everyone in the restaurant was a little disturbed and the level of conversation became quite noisy. As soon as the meal was over, we decided to head back to the jetty. Walking along the main street we noticed that the glass of the window of one of the shop fronts had been shattered with debris laying around. Apparently, a bomb had been thrown in the shop. Needless to say, we walked rather quickly back to the jetty. **To be continued** [Colin Spencer]



It strikes again!!

For those of you who have travelled to dear old Ireland you have more than likely ended up in Dublin and have been over come by the quaint ways of the local people – Molly Malone becomes

‘the tart with a cart’ and the Natural History Museum becomes ‘the dead zoo’ and so it continues.

So it will come as a major surprise that when wandering down Grafton Street a major feature has gone! Yes Bewley’s the wonderful coffee shop has gone... It has become a major feature in all our lives, but due to excessive rent, and sudden decline in customers, it has closed its doors.

Since 1840 the likes of James Joyce and Maeve Binchy have frequented the fragrant smells of the coffee and students and tourists alike rubbed shoulders in that wonderful place... Its like saying goodbye to an old friend – Goodbye Bewley’s goodbye.... [A tearful Richard Fernley]



...uninvited guests at sea (POWs)

January 1982. *RFA Tidespring* sailed for the US and Caribbean in support of the NATO Squadron. On passage was rammed by the German frigate *Augsburg* under No3 rig - steering failure during RAS.

On return *Tidespring* sailed to take part in exercise Spring Train off Gibraltar prior to her return to UK for disposal. Most of the ship’s company stayed for this short two week trip!!

2 April. Aware that the situation in the South Atlantic was deteriorating, sailed Gib somewhat overloaded including AS12 missiles, hundreds of drums of cased lub oil and virtually cleaned out the victualling depot. In all, food for five/six months. However, HM ships going south were grossly under stores which resulted in us off-loading approximately two months of her stocks! While talking to Admiral Woodward on the RAS phone he enquired if we had

everything we needed?! I said I wouldn't mind some weapons. His reply 'You would probably be more danger to yourself than any enemy'!!!.

3 – 7 April. Intensive training – over 50% of the ships company were from the Pool and in need of basic fire and damage control training. They also had to adjust to a semi-military type environment.



RFA Tidespring - when new in the sixties her flight deck arrangement was simply seen as a 'spare deck' by 1980s that view had changed to 'vital asset'.

Assessment of *Tidespring's* operational capability in a modern hostile environment gave considerable cause for concern (the result of a minimal keep you going until disposal last refit). Some but not all defects:

- A positive pressure could not be achieved in either citadel.
- Type 182 sonar was inoperative.
- Degaussing system inoperative.
- Dimmer switches for navigation lights had been defective and were disconnected at last refit.
- No countermeasures (Chaff etc)
- Main and auxiliary plant had been subject to failure during the Caribbean deployment and was a considerable worry for the engineering staff throughout the period in the South Atlantic.
- No defence watch or action stations organisation existed.

10 April. Ascension Island (ASI) embarked M Coy 42 RM Commando, two Wessex Five of 'C' flight 845 and

SAS detachment. Public rooms become dormitories, ships company double up with 'visitors'. Captain's Quarters occupied by nine NCO's. Captain's Mars Bars stock in fridge go missing! !. 21 April. Off South Georgia.

Tidespring's aircraft insert SAS.

22 April. Both Wessex 5's lost while recovering SAS aborted venture on Fortuna glacier. No casualties.



'For Sale description in the auction catalogue: 'Impression of a former refrigerated Mars Bar looking appetising with a discrete background of Navy Grey. Artist Anon.'

23 April. Downwind RAS outside normal limits in heavy swell and gale force winds. Aborted due to submarine alert. Subsequent questioning of POW's from *ARA Santa Fe* suggests she was that submarine. (It is worth considering what impact the loss of *RFA Brambleleaf* and *Tidespring* coupled with possible loss of *Antrim* and *Plymouth* – their critically low fuel state, might have had on UK resolve.)

26-27 April. In Cumberland Sound off Grytviken. CTG asked if *Tidespring* could accommodate 'some' prisoners. I replied 'Delighted!' The shortest signal I have ever sent and, as they arrived, one I regretted when I realised just how many there were – how do you run a POW camp? Turned hold, hanger and two magazines into accommodation – built bunks, oil drum toilets, bedding, clothing, wrote POW Orders, set up the routine for daily Convention meetings with Senior Officers in captivity (Bicain

and Largos). Much to my annoyance at the time and despite requests no material help was received from RN units. Lt Cdr Astiz ARA and his special services group identified and isolated 27 April-1 May. Sail and remain in area. First night onboard the evening meal was sent down to the holding areas whereupon the Argentinian officers pushed to the front and managed to take more than their share of the food leaving their men with almost nothing. They never got the opportunity to do this again! During these first few days prisoners complained that they did not care to eat corned beef or tinned beetroot or rhubarb. With little else left, they soon got used to both.

2 May. Depart for Ascension Islands.

12 May (am). IRC and SIB personnel flown to *TS*. (interviews and interrogation). A number of my Officers RFA & RN interviewed by IRC. At the conclusion I was advised by Dr Tershiling(?) that I would be held accountable for a total of seven breaches of the Geneva Convention.

The breaches were:

- Failure to remove prisoners from a combat zone without delay – ordered to remain in area.
- Prisoners held under degrading conditions – best available under prevailing conditions and available facilities on board.
- That a policy of demoralisation was in force – cited one incident where two marine guards suggested that the entire Argentine Navy currently at sea had been sunk by the RN.
- Collective punishment had been applied to military personnel on three occasions – no comment.
- No lifejackets were provided – a valid point, though we had tried to obtain extra jackets both before departure and from another RFA a day later.
- That as a non-military officer I could not take charge of POW's – I

countered by stating that Lt Tidd RN was running the POW element for me. However, I was advised that this explanation was not acceptable as I was quite obviously in overall command and therefore, *de facto* the 'Camp Commandant'. The complaint stood!

- Failure to pay a prisoner allowance and failure to provide facilities to spend the allowance – I neither had the funds nor the canteen stores.

As a point of interest, Lt Mike Tidd RN (my ex-Flight commander) who ran the POW organisation was nicknamed the 'Angel of Death' by the prisoners. I have no idea why.

12 May (pm). Disembarked all POW's and other detainees. All alive, fit and well in freshly laundered uniforms or UK AWD (*Ed*: No 8s in old language).

16 May. Sail to join Carrier Battle Group (CBG). On passage developed an 'empty out' system whereby there was no longer a need to retain any part of the operational fuel load for ballast purposes. This increase our issuable fuel levels by over one third.

20 May to 26 June. With CBG. Ship staff mount newly arrived 3" rocket outfit. 'C' flight move ashore. Our third Wessex 5 lost when *Glamorgan* hit by Exocet.

26 June. Enter San Carlos water.

28 June. Sail for UK via Ascension and a welcome injection of fresh food.

22 July. Arrived Portsmouth after 93 days at sea. [Shane Redmond]

Donation from Branch

We are pleased to announce that the RFAA London Branch have made a small donation to Seafarers UK. We could only make a small donation owing to a lack of income during this time of 'The Virus', but it is felt that this is an important recipient of our funds.

<https://www.seafarers.uk>

Did you know?

A Royal Marines garrison was established on Ascension Island, in 1815, to prevent the French using it to rescue Napoleon from St Helena. Gradually its strategic role grew as the Royal Navy's West African squadron exercised its anti-slave trade patrols.



It was interesting reading about the various cuisines on RFA ships. On *RFA Black Ranger* the Old Man had a dilemma. During lunch of Roast Beef and Yorkshire Pudding, unusually fortified with an aperitif the 3rd Engineer made it clear that he came from Yorkshire and that the pudding was not what it says on the tin and made it clear to all that there was no room for him and the cook on the ship. The captain answered straight to the point saying 'you go' followed by deadly silence.

I did not know what happened next as I was transferred to *RFA Blue Ranger*... a much happier ship. The Maltese crew had a more Mediterranean menu. One day the Chief Steward approached me to tell me that Thursdays had spaghetti on the menu and said he would leave a dish for me in my cabin. While enjoying the fare John Gibbons 4th Engineer came into my cabin. This soon went out to all the officers. Captain Alf Waters asked Chief Steward Chetcuti if this should also be on the officer menu. It became a regular item.

More food... tied up on the buoys in Senglea Creek, Grand Harbour on night duty it was 3-minute rowing to the shore and order a take away fresh egg fried sandwich. It was a regular midnight feast. [John Caruana]

Newsletter Exclusive ...evidence that social distancing is not always easy to achieve



Exclusive... to RFAA members



Spray on your tongue Every 15 minutes to Avoid any kind of Virus 😊

17:35

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7th edition : August 2020

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