

BAPTISM IN SEASICKNESS

by Frank Ferri

I graduated from Leith Nautical College in 1951 and straight away marched down to Leith Pool to see if there were any jobs available. I was told that I had no choice, and that I was to report as Cabin Boy on board the "RFA Wave Premier", lying in the Imperial Drydock, in Leith.

Well, at least I didn't have to travel far, as I lived in Leith. I met a fellow college mate at the pool, who had just paid off his first ship and I convinced him to sail with me on the "Wave Premier". I doubt that he thanked me for it in hindsight!

On board, my first impression, was of the sickening stench of diesel fuel.

We were in port for a week before we sailed, and my father came down to the ship every day before we left.

The Royal Fleet Auxiliary was so secretive, that we didn't find out where we were going, nor the sailing date, until the actual day of departure.

Disappointingly, our first port was just a short way up stream from Leith, - Rosyth.

Eventually though, we were soon at sea and headed for Invergordon, where we spent a few days before heading back to Rosyth, to meet up with the rest of the Fleet.

Once at sea, the Chief Steward began to issue cold weather gear. Boots, duffle coats, long fishermen's socks, Long John underwear, and thick, polo necked fishermen's sweaters. I wondered where the hell we could be going.

As far as information went, every thing was very "hush hush", and on a "need to know" basis, in typical RN style. It was fairly obvious that we were headed North, as the weather was becoming colder and colder, and eventually we were informed that we were now on "Exercise Mainbrace" which we also learned were War Games, to be held at least 300 miles north of Iceland in the Arctic. It was November, and already bitterly cold.

The Fleet consisted of the battleship Vanguard, aircraft carrier Eagle, cruiser Swiftshure, a couple of Diamond class destroyers and some subs. The Weather was horrific, bitter cold, and with ice about two inches thick forming on the ships cables, and outer decks.

What a baptism in seasickness that was! I was unable to eat anything but dry cornflakes and water biscuits for days, and I was convinced I was going to die, in fact, I would have welcomed it!

The Arctic was depressing, with dusk 24 hours a day. No sun shine or proper daylight.

We would refuel three ships at a time, one starboard, one to port and one aft, the wake of the two ships alongside made the narrow sea channel as rough as any

sea we had faced, and we bounced, rolled and pitched crazily throughout the fuelling operation.



Frank Ferri 1954

The cold was all enveloping, and in an effort to try and maintain somewhere near normal body temperature in our crew, large thermos flasks of hot soup were made available in all alleyways of the ship, 24 hours a day.

The galley was down aft and food had to be transported midships via the flying bridge. It was a nightmare, trying to time the motion of the ship without benefit of the use of your hands for balance. I was caught by a wave one time, the tray of fried eggs went over the side, and I was fortunate to manage to hang on. I was soaked with all my heavy arctic clobber on, and I had to retire to my cabin to dry out for an hour.

One day our Bosun was involved in a serious accident. The crew of a Navy ship had fired a one metre length of steel rod from a .303 rifle. The rod was connected to a thin line, which in turn was connected to a thicker line etc. By this method the ship's fuel lines were brought aboard our ship for the refuelling

process to begin. The rod hit an air vent on our ship and ricocheted off, straight into the Bosun's calf, sea boot and all! He had to be taken aboard the Navy ship, "Swiftsure" to have an operation on his leg, and the only method of transfer was via Bosun's chair, over very heavy seas.

I had joined the Merchant Navy to see the world and to bask in tropical climes, I was pretty much ready to jack it all in then and there, but fortunately I stuck with it and enjoyed the rest of my service, though I made sure that I stayed away from the Royal Fleet Auxiliary from that time forward!

Thanks for the memories, Frank Ferri