

CHAPTER XSPRING CRUISE

During the Christmas leave period I developed a shocking sore throat which made me very miserable and as my normal gargling had little effect I went to see the Surgeon-Commander. He had a look at my throat, shuddered and said, "They must have removed your tonsils with a pair of pliers! But come with me, I think I know the best medicine for that complaint". He thereupon led me to the ante-room, ordered two large gins, gave me one and said, "Drink that. Don't gargle it". I felt a lot better but I cannot remember whether it really did my throat any good.

At the end of the leave period a contingent of R.N.V.R. ratings from Leith joined the ship and a more careworn, hungry lot of youngsters I had never seen before. It was fairly clear they had joined the R.N.V.R. in order to get a square meal. Times were hard and no doubt there was a good deal of unemployment in Leith.

Cosmo Graham promptly turned the whole lot over to me. "They are your babies, Middleton", he said. "I'm not going to have them spoiling the appearance of the Boys Division so we will have a separate R.N.V.R. division. You can have an experienced Leading Seaman as nurse".

The Leading Seaman obviously did not fancy his job and when he had fallen them in he reported to me and said, "I think the first thing is to get them cleaned up and fed. Then we can decide whether they are human or not". I agreed and said I would ask if they could have extra rations as <sup>it was clear that</sup> they were pitifully under nourished, ~~it was clear~~. This was done, the boys slung their hammocks, and when I went down to their mess deck they were looking much more cheerful and more seamanlike.

Soon after 'hands fall in' next morning, my Leading Seaman was before me saluting.

"Them boys, sir; you'll never believe it!"

Resigned and ready to believe anything, I said,

"Well, what is it?"

"During the night sir, they all got up, ate all today's bread for the mess and raided the messes alongside. Thirty loaves they've eat, sir".

This was roughly a loaf of dry bread apiece. At divisions they still looked hungry but were given dispensation for the bread incident.

During the forenoon the R.N.V.R. ratings were given some instruction, shown round the ship and told off as cooks and sweepers of the mess. Soon after 'Cooks of the messes' was piped my Leading Seaman appeared with some of his brood with rather satisfied looks on their faces. They also looked somewhat less hungry.

"These are the cooks of the mess, Sir", he reported.

"They drew the food for the whole mess and had nearly eaten the lot before 'Hands to dinner' was piped".

"Those four ate thirty men's grub", I gasped, "I don't believe it"

"They've eaten a jolly sight more than half of it, Sir, and their mates are waiting down below to scrag 'em".

"Well, you'd better keep them apart until the others have eaten. I'll see what we can do about it".

The galley was able to provide another set of dinners and a big whack for each boy, at that, topped up with a special helping of duff. Nearby messes offered contributions. Within a few days they were all beginning to fill out and were losing that wolfish look. Not only that, they were beginning to look and walk like seamen. Gone were all the ill-fitting jumpers and trousers and their caps had that sharp, elegant curve which catches the eye.

I felt this was really a job worth while.

Kit inspections were usually rather a riot as a good deal of 'borrowing' went on and some of the smaller lads would only be able to muster a vest and a couple of pairs of socks. My Leading Seaman was wonderful and taught them all the tricks of the trade and discouraged bullying with a hand of iron.

I used to take my division for a certain amount of instruction and there were one or two boys who could not seem to get the hang of boxing the compass at all. In the hope of raising a little more interest I told them that some lascar seamen in the ships of the P & O company used to paint the compass card on the tops of their little round canvas topees. I said it was a pity they were not allowed to do the same as they would then be able to whip off their cap and check up on the compass points. I should have known better. Next day at divisions the Commander said to me angrily:-

"What's that man got on his cap?"

"I gave the order 'Off cap' to the rating in question and there, rather crudely drawn in coloured chalk, was a compass rose!" I gather <sup>the joke</sup> ~~it~~ went down very well on the lower deck. There were proposals <sup>as</sup> to what I should suggest next, including some rather rude ones as to what the Commander should paint, and where!

'Furious' sailed from Portsmouth and embarked her flights and then, with the rest of the Home Fleet, proceeded for the spring cruise, on which ~~they~~ <sup>we</sup> joined the Mediterranean Fleet for manoeuvres. Of course, we did not take drifter 'Cloud' with us so I reverted to watchkeeping on board and also completed the flying portion of my air course. We also did an interchange with the officers of submarine flotillas - The 'Furious' officers went out for trips in submarines and the submariners went flying. On balance, I think the 'Furious' party enjoyed submarining better than the submariners enjoyed flying.

I spent a day in an 'L' class submarine and thoroughly enjoyed it. Just as in flying one gets little real feeling of either speed or height, in a submarine one gets hardly any impression of being submerged. You are in a brightly lit, white painted compartment with all sorts of fan and motor noises and it is almost exactly like being in a compartment below the waterline in practically any naval vessel. The only way I was able to get the impression of being submerged was to look through the after periscope and watch the whole of the vessel, including the forward periscope, disappear beneath the waves.

We did some attacks on the submarine Depot ships, Alecto and Adamant, and also some station keeping on other submarines below periscope depth. I thoroughly enjoyed my day and thought that had I been given the opportunity to turn over to the Royal Navy as a submarine officer, instead of in the Fleet Air Arm, I should have accepted with alacrity.

My R.N.V.R. ratings had settled down and were now well-fed and healthy looking. They mustered for P.T. on the flight deck with the boys division and were at some disadvantage in the more vigorous games owing to their lack of stature. In one game in which the rear rank had broom handles and were allowed to belabour the front rank man in a sprint race - if they could catch him - the longer legged boys fairly beat up my lads. When positions were reversed the R.N.V.R. ratings could not run fast enough to get their own back and two of them, exasperated at being unable to get in even one good blow, hurled their broom handles like javelins with such good effect that the members of the Boys division they were chasing had to be removed to sick bay for treatment.

In Gibraltar, the ability of the Leith bred R.N.V.R. ratings to play on the stony football pitch with its germ-infested surface without fear of the consequences of a fall, made them tough opponents



even for some of the most skilled ships' teams. At the end of their six weeks training, a number of them asked permission to join the Royal Navy and they were enrolled in the stoker branch. I was very proud of the progress made by my half-starved urchins during their stay on board. Although originally almost complete strangers to discipline in any form, they left the ship a cheerful friendly and well-integrated lot of chaps. Good food and a healthy life no doubt had a great deal to do with it but so did coming to terms with discipline, which really means life in general, and this latter would stand them in good stead for the rest of their lives.

Although during my air course I did not have to release any more pigeons, 'Furious' had quite a large aviary containing a number of these birds, said to be very valuable. This aviary was on the port side at the forward end of the main deck and open to the air. At one of the full calibre shoots at a high speed target we opened fire with the port 6" guns on the extreme forward bearing. The blast from the forward 6" gun killed every pigeon stone dead. It was a sad end for these handsome birds.

In addition to the aircraft which operated from the deck, 'Furious' also carried a Fairy 3D seaplane and while in Gibraltar this plane was detailed to tow a drogue target for us to do a practice anti-aircraft shoot. Unfortunately, in taking off she hit the wash of a fast launch and lost a float. As she was airborne before this was realised a quick decision had to be made as to the safest method of getting her down again. By radio telephony the pilot was offered the choice of alighting in Gibraltar harbour and being picked up by harbour launches or at sea with our attendant destroyers carrying out the rescue work. The pilot replied,

"At sea by destroyers after the shoot",  
and this was approved. So we did our shoot and afterwards our

attendant destroyers were stationed on our port beam, about 4 cables away; and the sea plane came down to alight in the middle. The pilot made a perfect approach and touched down on one float on which the plane skimmed along for some distance with one wing high in the air. Then the plane lost speed, the unsupported wing hit the water and all three occupants came hurtling out, having obviously released their safety belts in readiness for a quick get-away. I believe all three subsequently received decorations, which were truly earned!

One of the major features of the spring cruise was the entertainment devised by various ships. Stephen King-Hall as Commander of 'Repulse' (I think - or it could have been one of the other 'Rs') put on an extremely ambitious production which was undoubtedly the prototype of 'The Middle Watch' and another warship threw a Cote d'Azur party in which all the guests arrived by 'Blue Train'. This was a dockyard train, rigged out with <sup>2</sup>dining car and manned by typical French railway personnel, which steamed round the dockyard before arriving alongside the host ship.

As an aircraft carrier 'Furious' obviously had great possibilities and it was decided to make the basis of the party an 'Old English Fair'. The amount of time, money and effort that went into the preparation for this astounded me, which by this time was not easy to do.

The after aeroplane lift to the flight deck was chocked up in the half-way position between the lower and the upper hanger decks. Then a magnificent staircase was constructed from the main deck to the left and from the lift to the upper hanger. It was said that Cosmo Graham borrowed timber from every ship in the fleet and the dockyard in order to do this.

The well in which the lift was housed on the main deck was filled with water and transformed into an impressive artificial lake and a whole host of side-shows built in the lower hanger. There was a full scale coconut-shy run by Cosmo Graham with me as assistant, which meant I ran it as he was far too busy overseeing the whole outfit. There was a boxing booth, strong man, fat lady, fortune-teller, rifle range and practically every booth normally found in a fair. Lit by strings of coloured lights and decorated with innumerable flags, it was a splendidly gay scene.

The upper hanger was rigged out as a 'Palais de dance' with professional dancing partners (wives and girl friends) for whose services tickets had to be purchased and the whole arrangements were in the hands of typical 'Palais' M.C's, who were quick to warn guests of unbecoming behaviour, like having both feet off the floor at the same time when doing the 'Charleston'.

Full operation orders in standard naval form were issued for the party by Cosmo Graham commencing, I remember, with the words:-

"Officers are expected to lay themselves out to entertain their guests - otherwise their guests are likely to lay them out to entertain themselves".

Guests started arriving round about eight o'clock and amongst them of course was the Governor, and Rear Admiral Gibraltar and senior ~~and~~ junior officers of all three services and their partners.

One of my earliest customers at the coconut shy was Prince George, then a lieutenant in one of the battleships. Although in a somewhat carefree, hilarious state, he could throw like Clive Lloyd and soon had a couple of coconuts down. I went along to retrieve them and on his suggestion, threw the first for him to catch. He missed it and on hitting the steel deck it burst like a bomb and a rather evil-smelling one at that. His Royal Highness took

great exception to this and seemed to think it was a put up job. He retaliated by sending a hail of wooden balls at me, which of course, was just the thing to delight the onlookers, who encouraged him with wild hunting cries.

The party was, of course, a tremendous success and voted one of the best ever. There was a less happy result at the end of the month when I found I had a mess share of £5 to pay for it. In fact, I believe many officers contributed £20 or more, which was a lot of money in those days. I must say it was good value.

Before leaving the subject, it might be as well to explain why it was that the coconut so ably won by Prince George burst into rotten fragments. I had been deputed to go ashore in Gibraltar and buy the necessary coconuts to stock the shy but a call at every greengrocers in the town produced an entirely negative result. March was not the season for coconuts and nobody had any.

Cosmo Graham was not put off by a little thing like that.

"How can we have a coconut shy without coconuts?" he asked.

"Don't be silly, Middleton. If there are no coconuts in Gibraltar, get them from somewhere else. Spain, Africa, anywhere you like but don't come back with ridiculous stories of there not being any coconuts!" He obviously meant it.

So back ashore I went again and choosing the friendliest of the greengrocers, I asked his advice. Realising the seriousness of the matter he said,

"Must they be good coconuts?"

I replied that it mattered little what sort of coconuts they were as long as they looked like coconuts.

"I got plenty bad ones", he said, pulling out a sack from under the counter. "You can have these for half a crown". There were about 30 or 40 authentic looking coconuts in the bag and I



returned in triumph with them to the ship. I told the Commander they were sub-standard and he looked at me in astonishment.

"Who will know the difference?" he said.

My time in 'Furious' was now rapidly drawing to a close. It was suggested that I remain in the ship and complete the spring cruise but I was anxious to sit for my 1st Mate's certificate and I felt it was now high time I returned to my job in the P & O company. So a passage was booked for me in the P & O S.S. 'Malwa', homeward bound from China and Japan.

On the last guest night before I left, Cosmo Graham got up and made a little farewell speech on my leaving and the port was passed a third time. Everyone was in a rather festive mood and after dinner the ante-room erupted into a brilliant wardroom games session.

The aerobatics team did some wonderful somersaults over armchairs, ending up sitting in the chairs in some miraculous way. Several people drank beer and whisky standing on their heads, one noble soldier guest receiving a large jug-full of ice cold water down the leg of his overalls in the process. The dogs of the after capstan, weighing several hundredweight, were tucked into the 1st Lieutenant's bunk and I went to bed feeling I had had a most regal send off, which was worth the headache I knew I would have next day. I must admit that up to that time I had no idea my shipmates had any regard for me at all and I always felt Cosmo Graham rather went out of his way to make life difficult for me. No doubt, he did it with the best of intentions.

Next day, feeling rather frail, I was summoned to drinks with Captain Henderson. These proved to be champagne cocktails and I found that Mrs Henderson was also travelling home in 'Malwa' and I was asked to look after her, using my P & O influence, such as it was, to ensure her comfort. She was very charming and I cannot help feeling that she was better able to look after herself than I. All the same, I got a very pleasant letter from her after the voyage.

It took me all the voyage home to recover from my enthusiastic farewell to 'Furious' and once more, without any delay, I prepared to sit for my next ticket. I joined the school of navigation at the Sir John Cass Institute and was soon immersed in concentrated study.