



FIG. 1—H.M.S. 'FISGARD' IN 1983

## FISGARD FINALE

BY

LIEUTENANT-COMMANDER J. BARRIE, R.N. (RET)  
*(recently of H.M.S. Fisgard)*

We gave the Main Gate another lick of fresh paint. We looked in awe at the approaching throngs. The sun shone brilliantly from a clear blue sky with only a few breezes to cool the afternoon. This was the setting for the 'Fisgard Finale'.

We had agreed that this day, Saturday 13 August 1983, would be something special in the memories of the 20 262 apprentices and ex-apprentices who had entered *Fisgard* since July 1940 and for those who were coming to pay last respects to their happy home.

Starting a year earlier, we had held preliminary meetings to establish ground rules for the occasion and in the event, only one rule was broken—we allowed a widow to attend to represent her husband.

When in doubt, form a committee, and this we did with an engineer officer as chairman. We had a representative from each of the Executive, Training, Catering, Establishment Services, Publicity, and Senior Rates sections of the staff, each being authorized to co-opt additional help (mainly expertise) in fulfilling the tasks we were set. Within this loose structure, the Executive and Training representatives gradually established an autocracy and made major and minor decisions on the spot. This was to prove vital as the day of the event drew near. Fortunately they lived in adjacent offices with linked telephones and intercoms next to the establishment Planning Centre which was to become the hub of the operation.

The 'Finale' was to be a non-profit/loss making event. No monies were available from public funds. Costs and numbers attending were inextricably bound up with facilities for feeding and entertaining large numbers—and giving them shelter in the event of bad weather.

The Captain and Heads of Departments had decided that the most suitable time of the year would be in August and that the best date would be Saturday 13 August 1983. Over, then, to the Committee.

Two of its members, Retired Officers, had had previous experience in planning *Fisgard's* 30 year Anniversary celebrations in 1976 and their experiences proved to be invaluable. Many of the staff were ex-apprentices themselves, including some of the Committee and co-opted members.

A pack was started to contain the official record and is destined for MOD archives. The first paper was written in May 1982, almost one and a half years before the event, and as a result of the Nott Review of 1981, Flag Officer Plymouth's Marquee, which was to be a lynch-pin in our plans for catering and shelter, was booked as early as September 1982. These points are mentioned to illustrate the lead-time necessary to organize a national and, in the event, international gathering of this nature.

In retrospect, the introductory paragraph of the first-ever Memo to be issued now rather amusingly reads:

Considerable numbers of senior officers, past and present, serving and retired, representatives of civil and civic agencies, local organizations, ex-apprentices, families etc, etc, are expected to attend. The detailed Guest List has not yet been decided.

That last sentence was a masterpiece of understatement!

We knew from the beginning that we could handle 'our' part of the show, the provision of shelter and catering facilities, the access and demonstrations in workshops, academic training and naval general training activities; these were our bread-and-butter of Passing-in and Passing-out Parades held each term.

What we did not know were the numbers likely to attend, and how to advertise the event. Never loath to make decisions, we decided to limit the number of guests to 1000 ex-apprentices and up to 200 VIPs and local dignitaries. In the beginning we aimed at a 'stag-only' event, but retained the option of inviting wives (not children) if numbers permitted. This decision on numbers was crucial to all planning that stemmed from it.

The Catering Officer did her sums and presented three attractive menus, each including wine, at a cost of £2.50 per head, but free to the diner. We settled on a lavish buffet-style supper to be held in the Main Dining Hall, and the Executive Officer extracted a promise of £2500 support from the Apprentices' Welfare Fund. Additionally, the VIPs and dignitaries were



FIG. 2—KIT INSPECTION

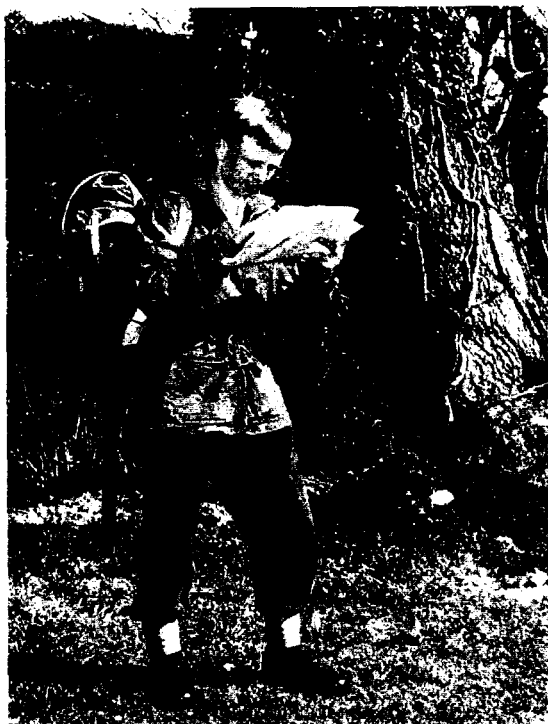


FIG. 3—INITIATIVE TRAINING



FIG. 4—PT DISPLAY TEAM

given the option of having their buffet supper in the Wardroom at a cost of £6.50 per head (unsubsidized). For a number of reasons, some of them, mainly ex-apprentices who had now risen to high rank, elected to eat with their classmates in the Main Dining Hall.

Flag Officer's Marquee was designated as the main bar area, capable of holding around 600, with the Senior Instructors Mess and the Stannary Recreation Centre as overflows. Full bar facilities were provided in each, ably staffed and supervised by members of the Senior Instructors Mess. The marquee was pitched immediately outside the Main Dining Hall and consideration was given to constructing a canvas tunnel from one to the other in the event of bad weather. On the day, it was not required and guests were able to totter the 15 steps from door to door without difficulty.

Ron Emerson, CMEA(P) retired, of the 1953 entry, wrote:

The evening meal was splendid. An old stager who engaged me in conversation suggested there was more food in the dining hall that evening than he saw through all his 4 year apprenticeship!

The problem of publicizing the event exercised our minds greatly. The first outlet, naturally was 'Navy News' and we placed a warning notice in the March issue urging readers to read the details in the April issue. We then opened the flood-gates and sat back. We set up a detailed but essentially simple set of charts in the Planning Office for all staff to peruse, and started logging-in our customers. From Plymouth they came, and Portsmouth, and Faslane; from Bath, and Manchester, Edinburgh, and Macclesfield. They came from Hong Kong, Australia, Dubai, Oman, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, and the U.S.A.

We advertised further in naval engineering, electrical, and air publications and in Command Temporary Memos, and sent notice board posters to all ships and establishments in U.K. The response was gratifying. H.M.S. *Conqueror* booked en masse. MOD Bath booked a bus-load, Vospers another. We made provision for trailer caravans and motorized caravettes and hundreds of cars. Thank heavens for the extensive playing fields which we used as car parks.

The Captain took charge of the lists of VIPs and local dignitaries. We were looking for ex-Captains of *Fisgard*, for admirals who had started off as apprentices, for our local M.P. and 'representatives of civil and civic agencies', as originally stated in our remit. And in mid-stream, in the light of pressure from our customers, we extended the invitation to wives. With hindsight, we ought to have included wives from the start, and the decision was hard-debated.

The wives were magnificent. In all their summer finery and captivating hats, they made an unending splash of colour as they sat around the Parade Ground or mingled happily with others whom they had not met for years. It was a reunion, indeed.

We had planned to open the gates at 1330 and close them at 2330; this was largely successful, give or take half-an-hour either way. But how to occupy the guests for 10 hours? Not that they would need attention once they were reunited. And if it rained? We decided *it would not rain*. This was another crucial decision and was to colour all our planned activities.



FIG. 5—CROSS-COUNTRY

Little attempt was made to 'occupy' the guests. Long periods were left for them to look over their establishment, browse through the records, inspect the facilities, and to be entertained by 1983 apprentices in displays, drills and ceremonials. Groups of chairs were scattered at random throughout the grounds so that groups could just sit and talk.

We had earlier decided on a colour-coding system for each guest using name tallies to be worn for entry to the Main Gate, and to be worn throughout the day. We decided on 10-year blocks, and any guest in that particular block was sent a suitably coloured tally stating only surname and initials and term of entry. The seating plan around the Parade Ground was also colour-coded in blocks so that guests would be seated among contemporaries. It also eased the problem of calling-forward by blocks the guests who wished to March Past. Each block fell in on its marker who held a suitably-coloured sign-board. The colour-coding worked very well.

The disclosure of apprentices' training records going back to pre-World War II days, and the display of *Fisgard* magazines dating back to 1917 caused a great deal of excited and incredulous commotion. Long-forgotten memories were stirred as guests (and wives) saw past performances laid out before them for all to see.

Many successive classes of apprentices had laboured for years at the Hole, dug through shillet and rock by countless defaulters, to form the basis of the Swimming Pool. We mounted a photographic display showing the developing stages of its construction until now, totally enclosed, filtered and heated, it demonstrated to guests the results of their efforts. Many a past grumble turned to admiration when they viewed the fruits of their labours.



FIG. 6—'FISGARD FINALE'. MARCH PAST OF PRE-1940 ENTRIES

Admiral Sir Lindsay Bryson, Controller of the Navy, had agreed to be the Reviewing Officer at Ceremonial Divisions and at the ex-apprentices' March Past.

K. A. Perkins, COA retired, of the August 1938 entry, wrote:

But without doubt the most moving experience for me was the privilege of being invited to March Past. I could see two admirals in front of me and I knew there was one immediately behind me. We were all 'Boys' once again. I marched past with my shoulders straight and my arms swinging more than in a good many years. 45 years flashed through my mind. My wife said that she looked at me with pride; she knew me when I was an apprentice and I understood what she meant. For one last time I was marching again with a spring in my step and with the ambition and optimism of youth.

This, then, was our 'Finale'. A day of beautiful sunshine and lengthening evening shadows. A day of reunion and reminiscences; of nostalgia and memories; of happiness and admiration for the 1983 apprentices. There was also more than a tinge of sadness added to a feeling of 'a job well done'.

Leslie H. Blacker, WO(Eng), of the 1917 entry, wrote:

Can anyone describe what motivated the wonderful finale of yesterday? You and your ship's company must this morning be proud to have greeted us on such a day. Only a love of our past and loyalty to the Crown enabled us to bring together such a ship's company. Thank you, sir.