

# FROM SALE TO SAIL

BY

LIEUTENANT-COMMANDER R. J. K. MERYON, M.Sc., C.ENG.,  
M.I.MECH.E., R.N.  
(MEO, H.M.S. Gurkha)

**Date: 29 May 1982****Location: Calgary, Isle of Mull**

'Is that Dervaig 240? Can I speak to Lieutenant-Commander Meryon?'

'You are to report to Rosyth by 2nd June where you will find a ship for which you are to be MEO'.

Thinks: 'Sounds rather like the angels' message to the shepherds after the birth of Jesus!'

'In fact, as you are already in Scotland, go straight to Rosyth'.

'But, but, but, . . . I've only got a rucksack and climbing boots . . .'

\* \* \* \* \*

So started the marvellous challenge to extract a TRIBAL Class frigate from over two years laid up at Chatham. Eight weeks later, we were to steam under the Forth bridges.

Four ships were nominated that week-end to be brought forward: *Gurkha*, *Tartar*, and *Zulu*, all Type 81s, and *Berwick*. These would replace the four ships lost during Operation Corporate off the Falkland Islands. 'Replace' is perhaps a misnomer, but on the NATO tote-board the number of R.N. hulls would not thereby diminish.

All the Navy's old salts know the TRIBALS are super ships in which to serve: 'marvellous air conditioning; a lovely wardroom, you know; they were designed for the Gulf, weren't they?' It is also a generally accepted principle—or, perhaps, a myth perpetuated by TRIBAL engineers—that these ships test their MEO's stamina, patience, and wisdom, and certainly wear out the natural colour of his hair and the seats of his overalls with uncommon haste. Yes, the Executive are pleased to serve in a Type 81, even with its steam-driven Ops. room; engineers are more sympathetic. Yet these ships manage to generate a special spirit among their company, and TRIBALS tend to be happy ships.

## Personnel

The Divisional Officers' Handbook—that most necessary and revered volume—describes the matelot as the 'Most Important Single Factor'. Amen. Without a shadow of doubt, any object on the path to accomplishing this venture was surmountable because the ship's staff were of one company. Within the ME world, success was only achieved because of the experienced ratings that *Centurion* produced from their bottom drawer. Over one thousand men to be drafted that week-end must have been hard-draft.

## Reserve Ships Status

The Reserve Ships Authority (RSA) operates the ships that are laid up within a restricted budget. It must however be borne in mind that, when ships are called forward in earnest, the joining crew will know little of the ways of RSA or of the preservation procedures. The ratings' response will be to use their experience to activate the ship with all urgency. The means devised by the RSA to bring a ship forward making optimum use of its limited manpower, whilst adequate when time is not important, may well grossly hinder the joining team under these circumstances. The team will barely have time to consult the ship's documentation as the process advances, and will certainly have no time for devouring hefty tomes of RSA instructions.

### **Paper, paper, everywhere. Nor any use to us!**

Bearing in mind that the TRIBALS had been on the disposal list for fifteen months having already been with RSU Chatham for a year, it will be apparent that many recently issued general instructions (such as 'fit ameroyal injection to all frigate evaporators') will have by-passed the bring forward ships. A plethora of un-documentation confronted these ships, some of which was acquired by activating the dusty brain cells but some of which must still be overlooked. The ships have a dearth of DCIs, FTTIs, FTMs, S2022a's, As. and As., and modification notifications, all issued whilst laid up, and, of course, a gap in the shelf for that learned tome, the *Journal of Naval Engineering*. BRs were a nightmare—'Aren't they always?', I hear cried in anguish; yes, but here far more so. Imagine 600 BRs in one huge heap, carefully shuffled with their outstanding amendments, uninserted (naturally). Add to that the deficiency of amendments for the past year whilst no longer an official reserve ship . . . the plot doesn't thicken so much as coagulate!

### **Ever-elusive Stores**

Surprisingly, SPDC Eaglescliffe was flush with TRIBAL spare gear even two months into Operation Corporate—perhaps because the class had been on the Sales rather than the scrap disposal list. Naval stores were another matter; it is accepted that Corporate swallowed the many stores allocated to the Type 81s on the shelf, but how much more would have been the drain for a wider confrontation. Corporate must have been the smallest example of an arena of warfare wherein ships were called forward to participate. The plan to bring forward ships must cater for the huge parallel demand from units already operational and involved. The unofficial Storob ('Go and whip it off one of the TRIBALS') whilst the ships were in Chatham led to a heap of extra work, not only in acquiring the replacements but also in identifying what was missing. The legalized Storob was documented—not that this made it any easier to retrieve deficiencies.

### **Nut-Crackers**

Inevitably the adventurous challenge to resurrect the TRIBALS threw up some scathing quips for touchline supporters and headaches for the players. It was never to be an easy match—a walkover—but *Gurkha* was more compliant than initially anticipated. This reflects great credit on the thoroughness and dedication of the previous ship's company who had committed her to reserve, on the staff of the RSU Chatham who kept her ticking over, and on the success of the preservation techniques involved.

- (a) The dehumidification process that keeps the humidity within the ship at 40 to 50 per cent. was remarkably good: upon first entering the ship on 2nd June, the whole atmosphere was bright, clean, and fresh. No dampness, mustiness, nor evidence of severe corrosion was present. Joining a ship that did not appear entirely dead and depressing was a morale saver. The dehumidification, whilst 90 per cent. good, has deleterious side-effects: the various joints used in steam, firemain, air, fresh water, and hydraulics had dried out. This presented a phenomenal work-load, but in retrospect was trivial in comparison with the potential problems had no dehumidification been installed.
- (b) 'Give me chilled water' was a monotonous cry from the harassed WEO to a MEO who would have welcomed being just schizophrenic. With major boiler inspections, gas and steam turbine checks, the Allens gas T/A that was bound to be cussed (and was), a lack of chilled water seemed inconsequential. However, the tame WEO really needed it—and the chilled-water system was topped up with air and silt, and no

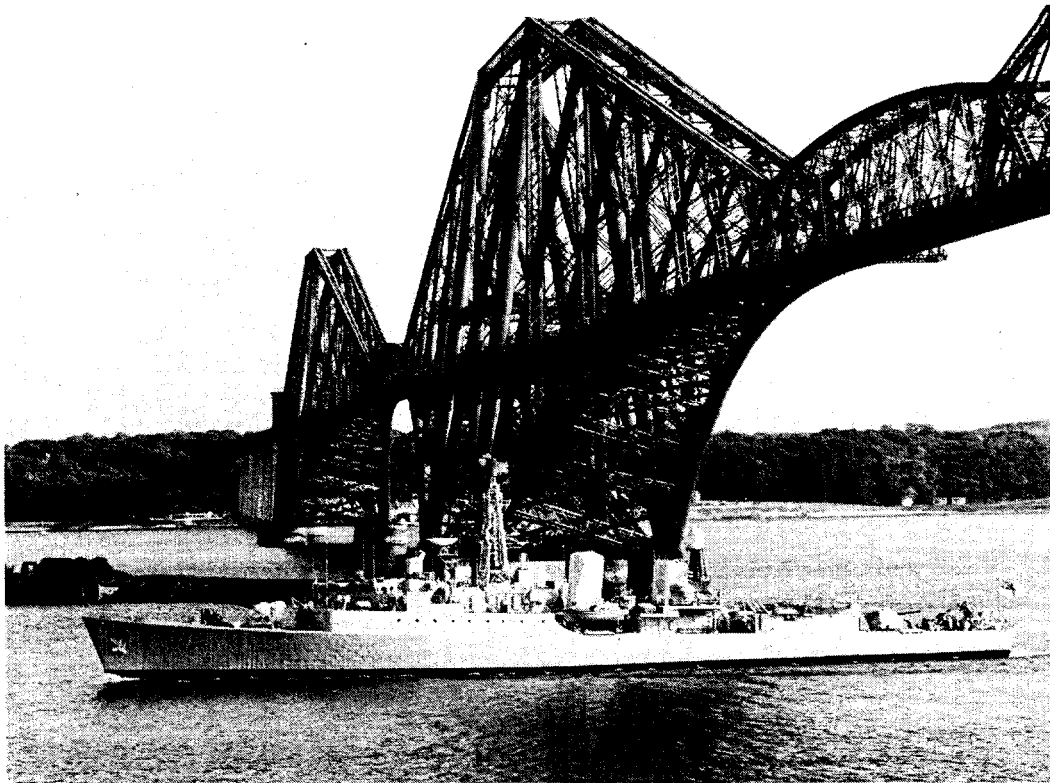


FIG. 1—H.M.S. 'GURKHA' SAILING UNDER THE FORTH BRIDGE

chilled-water plant would co-operate. (Was the holding charge nitrogen or R22?). The silt was the major factor, being a corrosion product of the interface between chiller and pipework systems. Although it would reduce the thermal efficiency of a running system, why not use glycol, or a similar inhibitor, in the charged chilled-water system of a laid-up ship? Invariably, the chilled-water system is on the critical path because of its downstream effect on weapons.

- (c) Recent years have allowed MEOs to heave a sigh of relief that their newer ships are spared the dreaded telemotor steering-control system. Those who enjoy this will be sympathetic towards those MEA(M)Is who have spent many man-weeks this year retrieving the TRIBALS' systems to operational standard; Sherlock Holmes would have proved invaluable in *Gurkha!*
- (d) A complete survey and structural load test of all RAS gear, eye-bolts, lifts, davits, and sonar 199 gantry—a considerable feat even during a refit—along with the replacing of 80 per cent. of the zinc anodes without docking had to be taken in one's stride.
- (e) Did I hear the last Commander (E) of the last *Ark Royal* comment that, whilst weapon systems were exchanged at refits, few machinery pipework systems were? One TRIBAL certainly has delicate pipework systems causing her frequently to become an incontinent, elderly lady. Random failures are occurring weekly, some with more dramatic effect such as causing the contamination of the main boiler with dieso. Each has to be accepted gracefully, recovery action being taken with great haste and good humour.
- (f) The order for the implementation of EBD 'forthwith' was received and executed with less than full zeal: whilst understandable that all other ships had completed the process by mid 1982, it was unfortunate

that this extra burden was loaded during a time of such peak activity. In principle it was completed, but the mammoth change to MEDSOs takes longer.

### **Face Aft and Salute**

In the thick of a situation, the overall view may be clouded: hindsight, however, reveals a stimulation and satisfaction with the mission. Undoubtedly the greatest factor has been the people: no snag has been allowed to become a problem, but rather was tackled as a challenge. Given a team with the will, all technical hurdles could (and had to) be overcome. The TRIBAL experience of the senior ratings, and the general acceptance that the whole ship's company shared evenly the 'green rub' of the pierhead jump, created a positive atmosphere that enabled the old girl to return 'From Sale to Sail'.

---