

H.M.S. ALBION—COMMANDO SHIP

A MAID OF ALL WORK

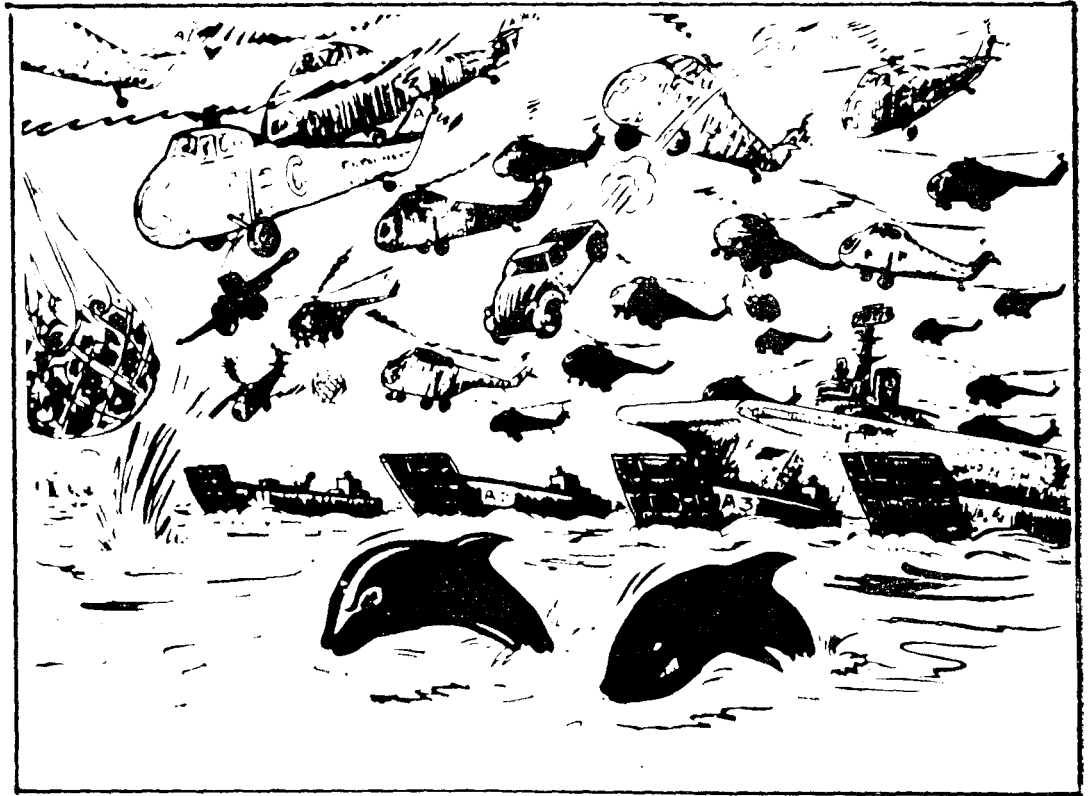
BY

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The illustrations for the following article were drawn by Lieutenant-Commander C. Miles, R.N.

H.M.S. *Albion* was converted to a Commando ship between February, 1961, and July, 1962, by Portsmouth Dockyard. The conversion was more sophisticated than that of *Bulwark's* original conversion. The main differences were in complete removal of catapults and arrester gear and the associated machinery. This permitted the building of additional messdeck accommodation. Commando and assault stores were built into 'A' hangar and the deep beam stowages. L.C.A. platforms, with Wellyn McLaughlin davits for the L.C.A.s

ASSAULT STATIONS—EXERCISE 'DOUBLE-TAKE'



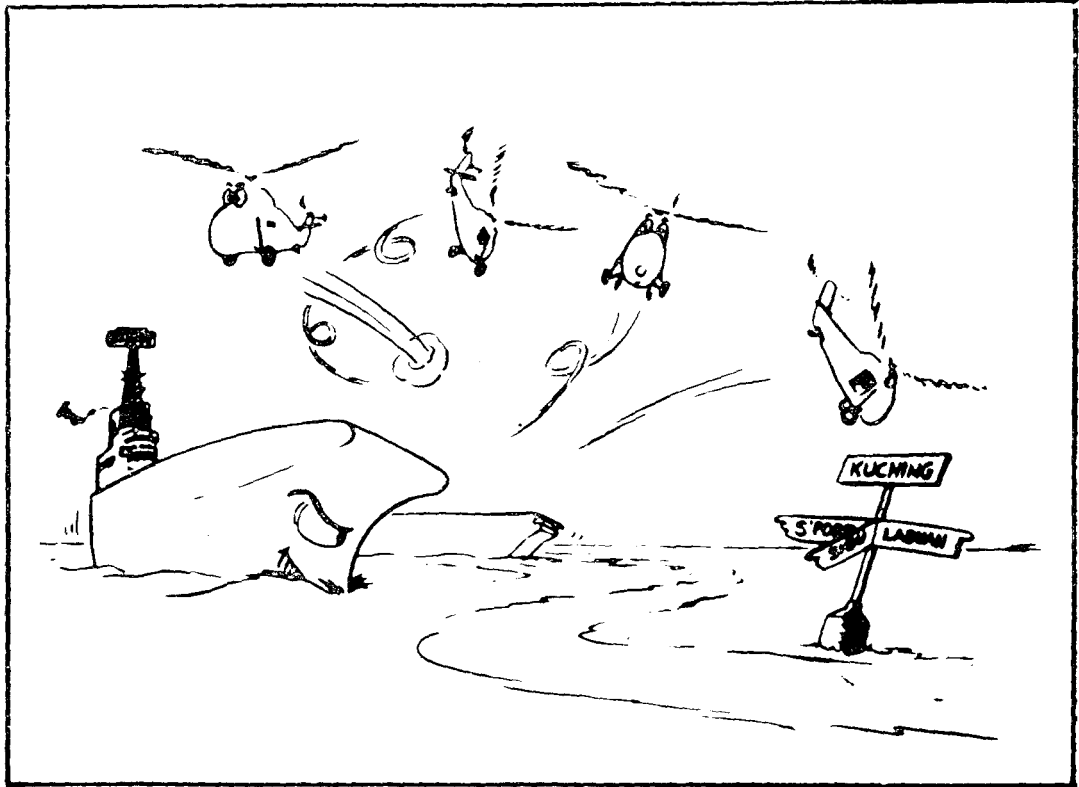
'Ker-rikey.'

were built on as a continuation of the boat deck. The messdecks on 4 deck were divided from the fore and aft passage by bulkheads and two 3-million BTU/hour air conditioning plants installed, enabling all messdecks, offices and operational spaces to be fully air conditioned.

The main machinery was virtually unaltered but some improvements were made to the distilling plants; boiler casings were made air tight, or almost so, some redundant machinery was removed and the reciprocating auxiliary feed pumps were replaced by centrifugal feed pumps. The whole installation was also given a thorough refit by dockyard and ships staff.

The requirement for H.M.S. *Albion* was to be able to carry a Commando, a Battery and an element of Brigade Headquarters; to be able to land them by helicopter or L.C.A. and to support them for a limited period with food, ammunition, fuel, stores, air lifts, boat lifts—the lot in fact. Trials and work-up were designed to start things moving and an evaluation period was supposed to occur during the commission to see just what *Albion* could do.

Sea trials started to time on 7th August, 1962, and from then until the end of the commission 21 months later *Albion* was kept busy, so much so that there was never time for the evaluation. We once sailed half an hour late with a minor fault on a motor driven F.L. pump cut-in, and once delayed a visit to Hong Kong for two days to have some work done on the auxiliary superheated steam overhead cross-connecting line deck pieces, which were found to be of faulty construction and were beginning to leak through the screwed threads securing the flanges to the deck pieces. These apart, we steamed over 80,000 miles at an average speed of 18 knots in air-conditioned splendour with unrationed water, even when carrying well over 2,000 men. We gave water away at Hong Kong during a drought and at Singapore to S.V.S.O. for ships coming out of refit or having distilling difficulty. This



'Nearly fooled me into thinking that they knew what they were doing next'

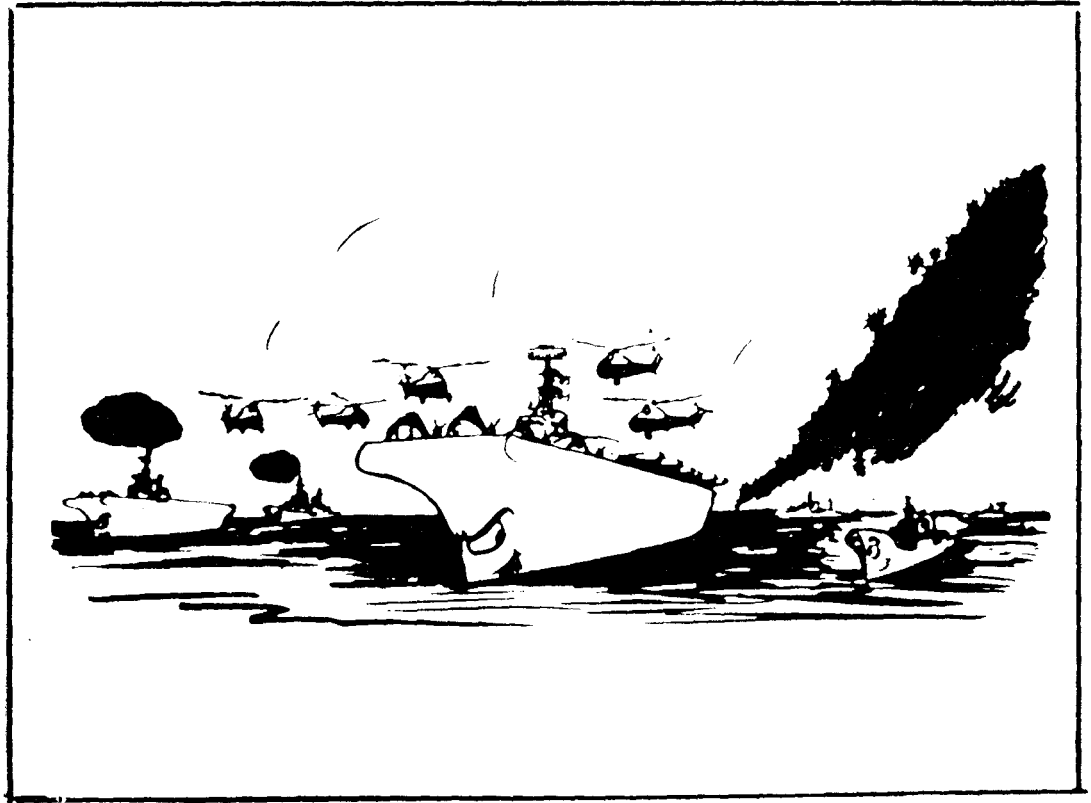
success is attributed to a continuous quest for reducing feed water consumption—and to a bet I had with my engineer officers that should they get the feed water consumption below 50 tons for any period of 24 hours at sea, they should each have a bottle of champagne. In fact it hardly ever exceeded 85 tons per day, even at high speed; it averaged 65 to 70 tons and twice got within one ton of the target. These occasions called for 'limited' celebration.

We grew quite accustomed to sustained high-speed steaming, quite unlike the ups and downs of the fixed-wing carrier. The longest period at full power was 24 hours from Singapore to Borneo; this, however had been preceded by five days at 90 per cent full power getting to Singapore where we drew breath for four and a half hours between rounds.

This first period in Borneo waters lasted for 24 days, steaming up and down the coast. We had left the United Kingdom six weeks earlier, had done two exercises on the way and so to keep in a reasonable operational state, did a short period of steaming on one unit at a time while maintaining the other.

Our role in the Far East for 18 months became that of troop transport, stores and air lift support ship, stores carrier, hospital ship, and a rest and recuperation centre for the Borneo campaign. Our mobility was of considerable value and we often rushed from one end of Borneo to the other overnight, moving troops and commandos by sea and air over distances which would otherwise have taken them days or weeks.

So, after what amounted to ten weeks' steaming 'on the trot', we went to Singapore for an assisted self-maintenance period. Obviously we had had a good refit at Portsmouth Dockyard and Singapore did us proud on all occasions of our quarterly self-maintenance period of two weeks duration. We like to think we knew how to look after ourselves; we had to, for from the beginning we never knew whether we were coming or going. Our programme changed



'One more crack about "Any more for the Skylark" and you'll join *Lion* and *Ark* on the sick list!'

from week to week, day to day and even hour to hour. There was never a dull moment, not even when we were in dry dock. During this period all work had to be carefully controlled to make sure that we could get out of dock and on our way in four days. Our few maintenance periods were often interrupted, started, stopped, restarted and reduced, but never increased.

The Borneo support running was well established after our first effort. It was, however, relieved over the commission by three trips to Hong Kong, docking at Singapore, a weekend visit to Penang, FOTEX 63, and a shopping run to Tobruk for the Royal Air Force. On this little trip of 11,100 miles we collected helicopters for the R.A.F. for use in Borneo. It took us 32 days to do the trip at an average speed of over 20 knots.

FOTEX 63 also had its moments when we finished up carrying two Admirals whose Flagships retired hurt during the exercise; *Albion* was the only 'big' ship left.

In our time we must have carried every commando, just about every soldier, and a goodly sprinkling of airmen, policemen, political prisoners and pressmen on the Station.

The air conditioning system, which we cared for jealously and meticulously, was a huge success and was, in my opinion, the main reason for our ability to keep going. It enabled us all to get good rest from our labours in the heat and humidity and to do our work much better than we would have done without it.

I was sorry to leave *Albion*, but at the moment I still have an indirect connection with her by being Overseer at the firms who built and engined her. I also drive to work along Albion Road, passing the Albion Cinema and the Albion Inn every day. I hope she survives as well as her name does on Tyneside.