

A Fishy Story

Back in 1965/66, during the Indonesian Confrontation, I was an Able Seaman in the Far East Fleet, serving on board the Air Direction Frigate HMS Lincoln, based at Singapore (and for a short time during that period, on a 'Ton' Class minesweeper, HMS Chawton, operating out of Singapore and Kuching - but that's another story). At that time, Lincoln was a bit of a fixture in the Far East Fleet, having been out there since early 1961 and certainly having done her bit from the start of Confrontation. We were kept busy patrolling the coasts of Borneo, Brunei, the Malaysian mainland, Sumatra, Malacca, Singapore - you name it, we patrolled it. We were actually patrolling the Singapore Strait on the day that Singapore broke away from the Federation, 9th August 1965, but I think the only practical difference it made to us at the time is that our 'customer' for that particular patrol, and future such patrols, became Singapore rather than Malaysia and Singapore as a whole. Christmas day 1965 saw us on patrol in the middle of the Malacca Strait.

Back in harbour in Sembawang in between patrols, or the occasional visit to Hong Kong, or the US base at Subic Bay in the Philippines, or the odd 'banyan' or two on the likes of the deserted beaches (at that time but not in these current days of mass tourism!) of Pulau Tioman or Sipadan, we remained at a heightened state of security which meant that we had to keep an armed patrol on duty at night around the side of the ship. This was in case of enemy divers and we had underwater lights rigged up around the ship, with us in the seaman branch spending a watch walking round the upper deck, armed with a Lanchester or Stirling machine gun. I say armed but not exactly; you didn't have any bullets. If you spotted a diver, it was a case of raising the alarm and getting a couple of bullets issued by the officer of the watch so you could shoot the trespasser. By this time, of course, he would have planted his mine and blown you up, so you might have to improvise in the meantime and rip something up off the deck to throw at him. Or leap over and hit him with the other contemporary Naval weapon available to us sailors, the ubiquitous pick-axe handle. Modern warfare in the '60s; ho, hum, all good fun.

It was when I was on one such duty, having the middle watch from midnight to 4 a.m., that the fish incident referred to in the title of this piece occurred. That evening, there had been a cocktail party for some dignitaries, wives or whoever on the fo'c'sle deck and it had been rigged up all pretty-like for them. There were plants and things dotted around the deck, supplied by a local business; also supplied on hire was a goldfish pool with about half a dozen appropriately coloured creatures in it. Sometime after midnight, my good oppo Happy came back on board after a night on the town, walked up to the fo'c'sle, and stopped for a chat as I did my rounds. He'd certainly had a good run ashore, I couldn't understand a word he was saying, so I suggested he got turned in and told him I'd better carry on with my rounds. When I got back round, Happy was still on deck, standing by the goldfish pool; with wet hands and a satisfied look on his face. A look down at the pool confirmed my initial suspicion, it was empty. Happy had been feeling a bit peckish and sadly for the goldfish, he wasn't any longer. Luckily, these goldfish were, or rather had been, pretty puny specimens for these parts considering the size of such fish you could get out there; the wardroom must have gone to a cheap supplier. Having said that, maybe Happy wouldn't have fancied them if they'd been giant carp, so they might have survived. "Jesus Christ, Happy, get turned in. And I never saw you, ok?" I said. "Don't worry, Scouse" he mumbled. Unfortunately, the officer of the watch had picked that moment to do his rounds and appeared on the fo'c'sle. "Everything alright, Able Seaman Carroll?" he asked. "Yes sir, just saying goodnight to Able Seaman Bryant". He looked at Happy, who stood there gently swaying and smiling at him "Evenin' sshhir". Then the OOW looked down at the pool and, having done the relevant courses at Dartmouth College, didn't take long to suss out the situation. "Get down below, Able Seaman Bryant. Able Seaman Carroll, carry on with your duty. I'll see you both in the morning". "Sh*t!" I thought.

The next morning, Happy was up in front of the table at First Lieutenant's defaulters and was given a few days No. 9s and stoppage of leave for his misdemeanours. What probably saved Happy a more severe punishment was maybe the fact that he had provided the Jimmy (First Lieutenant) with a good ditty to tell guests and fellow officers at future cocktail parties; I'm sure, away from the defaulters table, he was privately laughing his head off. Happy, bless him, swore blind that I wasn't there when he was eating his fish course and I couldn't have known what he was going to do, which I suppose was true,

so I was just taken aside by the Jimmy for a quiet word. He didn't want any similar eating between meals in the future! It wasn't a laughing matter when the local Sembawang goldfish supplier came aboard to collect his plants and fish, though. He went ballistic. So a little extra money changed hands between the wardroom and the fish man which was retrieved, I'm sure, from Happy at the next pay day and the man went away happy but no doubt making a note not to supply any fish - at least of the living variety - to the Royal Navy in future.

Another incident occurred on another night I was doing the same duty. We were berthed outboard of an old CA class destroyer, possibly HMS Cambrian, and my opposite number on that ship was carrying out his patrol. We had been nodding to each other as we passed on our rounds when suddenly, on one round, he whispered "Eh mate, come 'ere". So I went over to the ship's rail, leant across and asked him what was up. "See that spud locker?" he said (on some older ships potatoes were stored in cages on the upper deck) "Well there's a f***in' big rat under it and I'm sh*t-scared of rats. Can you give us a hand getting rid of it?" Now, I'd seen the rats on the jetty in this dockyard, round the gash bins, and they were BIG - the first time I'd seen one at the bins I'd thought it was a cat - so I sympathised with him. So, with not much confidence, I went across the gangway between the two ships and he handed me one of two brooms he was holding. "You poke from that end and I'll poke from this end" he said. So we were both stood there rattling these brooms about under this spud locker, with nothing happening. "Are you sure there's one under there?" I asked. "Oh yeah, dead sure" he said. Then all of a sudden this thing shot out - and it was big. We both sh*t ourselves, he disappeared for'ard and I disappeared aft, the rat disappeared altogether, with me praying it hadn't disappeared on to the Lincoln and then bumping into it later on my rounds. "Do us a favour mate" I said when we'd both plucked up the courage and made it back to the spud locker, "next time you see a rat, call Rentokil", or words to that effect but maybe using slightly more colourful language.

Thinking back over 45 years plus, the time those of us that were there spent during Confrontation really wasn't all that dull and boring, was it?