

Days of Yore (Part 2)

Part 2 of the wartime reminiscences of our President, Captain Reg Kelso MBE.

Immediately after breakfast “All Hands” mustered on the Main Deck for Prayers in the Gymnasium. Chosen Sea Cadets issued the prayer-sheets and, at the end of the short proceedings the Captain of “Foudroyant” would issue the order “Cadets, collect the prayer-sheets” followed by a clap of his hands. At that the “chosen ones” would rush around the ranks, collect the paper sheets and then tear towards the nearest wall bars – and climb them. The last one to do so was given a resounding blow on the “b.t.m” with the long stick wielded by the Petty Officer. I made certain that I was never the last !

“Morning Prayers” was followed by “Divisions” and the Sea Cadets then made their way to the gangway, embarked on a pinnace and voyaged to Unicorn Steps where a waiting RN bus took us to H.M.S. Excellent for lectures on physical fitness and some very hectic activities in the huge gymnasium under the guidance of R.N P&RTI’s. About 1700 this would come to an end and we would reverse our steps – by bus and pinnace - to our mothership “Foudroyant”, a quick cold shower and an evening meal before slinging our hammocks and turning-in for the night. On occasions the bus and pinnace would be late and so our return aboard was delayed but the evening meal was put on the mess deck tables at the same time daily – and so it was stone cold by the time we were able to attack it.

The routine over the next 11 days seldom varied except when there was an air raid alert when we “lashed and stowed” – but we did NOT “stow” because our canvas hammocks were our life-saving equipment. The ship had no lifeboats (as such) and life jackets were not in evidence but – as we were told at the first “Divisions” our hammocks would make excellent “Flotation Equipment” in the event of an “Abandon Ship” situation – but only if they were securely lashed.

“Foudroyant” was flanked by four large rafts – each containing a small anti-aircraft gun – and manned by naval personnel. We had heard them fire only once during the hours of darkness but on the eleventh or twelfth night they started to fire very frequently and very quickly we got the order to “Lash and Stow” and proceed with our hammocks to the Gymnasium. It was pitch dark, very cold – and about 0130, as we huddled together, we soon heard the sound of aircraft engines and the guns fired almost constantly which caused the ship to vibrate and “lift” in the water. The aircraft engine noise increased and then – very suddenly – there was a series of tremendous explosions and the ship quivered and appeared to lift out of the water. None of us knew what had happened but, almost immediately, the Petty Officer appeared and told us that Portsmouth had been heavily bombed and that we were to ‘go below, dress warmly and await further instructions”

Now fully dressed we returned to the Gymnasium but, within minutes, we were ordered to proceed to the gangway and as we did so it was apparent that Portsmouth had been severely damaged and the heat from the fires could be felt at a considerable distance. It was now about 0300 and as we embarked on the pinnace and proceeded to Unicorn Steps we were told that we were needed to tend the long lengths of fire hose being used to fight the many fires in the vicinity of H.M.S. Excellent. The hoses were made of canvas and appeared to be unlined so, when the water supply was interrupted – as it frequently was – the hose “kinked” and our job was to kick the kink free and allow the water supply to be restored. It was tedious and tiring work and as we ran up and down Flathouse Road “hosekicking” we gave thanks that that raiding aircraft had departed after inflicting such damage on our surroundings.

The night passed slowly but as dawn broke it was easier to see the devastation in our vicinity, particularly the fire raging on what appeared to be a huge warehouse. We were later told it was used to store “waxed bags” for foodstuffs. As the sun rose more and more naval ratings joined us but there was no sign of any relief- and I was very, very tired and not just a little scared ! It was now some twelve hours since we had eaten or had a drink and I was beginning to feel sick and faint but every time I limped towards a kinked hose – and there were many of them – I was encouraged to “liven up a bit, Lad”!

By now I had lost contact with my other Sea Cadet friends and I really had little idea where I was. It was now mid-morning and my thirst was beginning to make me feel very unwell ..not to mention my hunger. THEN ...just as I was thinking of deserting my post .. a small orange van came around the corner and stopped almost alongside ME ! Out jumped two ladies who pulled down a shutter which formed a shelf – and they produced a large bread roll filled with very fatty bacon – and a huge mug of very sweet tea. NEVER...never ..have I enjoyed a meal so much ..and soon the ladies were serving a long queue of Sea Cadets and Naval Ratings and I resumed my hose duties. It was now early afternoon and just as I was beginning to think that we had been abandoned and forgotten, a Naval Officer appeared and told us to return to Unicorn Steps and return to the ship. Forty minutes later most of us were fast asleep and we were left undisturbed until late evening when we wished that the meal set before us was as appetising as the bacon butty served by the ladies in the van.

Two days later we left Portsmouth and after an uneventful trip by train and ferry we arrived back in Larne and, eventually, reunited with our worried families who had read of the devastating raid on Portsmouth ..but no news of their offspring until we arrived in Larne.



Built in Bombay in 1817 as HMS Trincomalee, she was saved from the scrap-yard to replace a previous TS Foudroyant, wrecked at Blackpool in 1897. A training ship for over 80 years, she was recommissioned in 1943, together with HMS Implacable, to become HMS Foudroyant. Taken to Hartlepool in 1987 she was fully restored and renamed HMS Trincomalee. ...