

Army versus Navy

*This tale comes from Cachalot David Fisher, in response to my plea in the last edition for more copy.
Thanks David, any more out there?*

Some time ago, 1980 in fact, I was in command of an Army Landing Craft Logistic which was alongside a Naval frigate at Faslane. The names of both ships will remain undisclosed to protect the innocent (if indeed there were any).

Late the night before we had arrived back at Faslane from our weekly sailing to St. Kilda to drop off more supplies to the Army base at that time stationed there. Trouble is we'd had a lot of fog on the return and I was therefore on the bridge a lot of the time and a bit 'diffy' of sleep (as we used to say).

We berthed late at night, and I 'crashed out' in my cabin. After what seemed like no time at all, but it was actually about breakfast time, my steward woke me up informing me that I had been invited to coffee at 1000 hrs on the frigate alongside.

'Just what I need', thought I.

'Oh well, better make myself look decent and put on my sports jacket and tie I suppose'. (The normal off duty clothes after a sailing were jeans and jumpers or indeed anything relaxing, so I considered this to be a real effort).

At 1000 precisely I strode onto the brow between the two vessels, but was immediately horrified to see 4 sailors standing to attention and lined up on their ship, waiting for me to be piped aboard. Two officers were with them, and worst of all, the Captain of the vessel, a Commander, with his full ceremonial uniform and what I presume was his ceremonial telescope was also standing smartly awaiting my arrival. Much piping and saluting followed. But being in 'civvies' I couldn't return any salute. 'B..... H...', I thought to myself.

There followed a very stiff, awkward and virtually silent meeting for coffee in the Captain's day cabin. The taste of the coffee matched that of the atmosphere. During coffee I was asked if I would move my ship off at 0545 the next morning because the frigate had to sail. (Of course I had no choice in this, and anyway 'Ops' had already told me. Was he thinking of things to talk about?)

Anyway, feeling caught out, and to make up for my obvious ignorance of Naval customs, I later invited 8 of their officers on board for lunchtime drinks. That event went swimmingly well, (the Frigate Captain wasn't there) and the officers were considerably less stuffy than their Captain. In return they invited myself and my officers onto their ship for dinner that night. That also went swimmingly well, and we ended up celebrating in their wardroom until a horribly late hour. (The Captain with the telescope was not there because you may know that on Naval ships, as I understand it, the Captain has to be invited into the wardroom by his officers, unlike on Army ships).

The night lengthened, but on RN ships (apparently) the bars must be closed by a certain specified time, whereas on Army ships there is no such rule and we rely on common sense. When their bar closed it seemed therefore a friendly gesture to invite the officers back to my ship for a night cap and/or coffee, or even tea and buttered toast. This I did, and the offer was gratefully accepted, with much disbelief that this was actually possible. Of course the subsequent conversations carried on until an even more unsubtle hour.

Eventually however we all turned in, having discussed in detail the oddities and surprises of each other's service.

Then, rather like the night before, the next thing that I was aware of was my First Lieutenant (chief officer equivalent) waking me up at 0545 asking me if I was going to take the ship out or should he?

'What time is it?' I asked.

'Five forty five'.

'S.....' .

I leaped out of my bunk.

The first thing that came to hand were my old faded jeans, I put these on, with nothing underneath, then grabbed my naval issue duffle coat (made incidentally, the label said, in the same year that I was born, 1944) to go over my bare chest, stepped into my suede desert boots, and grabbed my army side hat.

I was on monkey island in seconds. (We normally conned the ships from there because of better astern visibility and the twitchy nature of the flat bottomed shallow draft vessels). Our monkey island was exactly level with the frigates bridge. Unfortunately. For on the frigate's bridge who should be staring at me in disbelief but the Commander, the Captain of the frigate. A very strange look on his face. Can you imagine how I felt?

Then I spotted something even worse. Two of my crew were walking around on the frigate's bridge offering sandwiches on silver platters to their incredibly large bridge party. WOW. And in today's terminology - OMG.

I gestured for them to return, and, well trained, they quickly scrambled back aboard my ship, no brow, and we let go.

I held onto the after spring and got the bow out as quickly as possible using the useful torque of the twin screws on a relatively beamy shallow draft vessel. (No bow thrust).

Then immediately ordered full ahead, a bit of a surprise for the engine room and not normal procedure, but then these were not normal circumstances. We left in an impressive cloud of dirty black engine exhaust from the funnel and lots of foamy white water slamming into the frigate's side.

I gave a little wave as we left, but as far as I can remember got nothing back from the Commander who still seemed to be staring. About 15 mins later and from a safe distance, I watched his ship depart, and then berthed back alongside where he had been, and went back to my bunk for a bit more rest.

After all, it had all been a very stressful experience.