

A NAVAL INCIDENT

I was in charge of victualling and messtraps (food, cutlery, china, etc) and clothing supplies on HMS 'Sharpshooter', a survey ship, an 'Independent command' vessel based in Singapore in 1946. Our mission involved survey work mainly in Borneo and Sarawak that meant I had to cater for a crew of 120 for up to three months without sources of restock.

The custom at that time was to issue a daily rum ration to all lower deck ratings who were eligible (over 18 years old), with the exception of those members who wish to abstain. The majority of the crew drew their 'Grog' issue which I had to keep a very accurate account and attend the daily routine. Strictly the rules stated that each tot was to be issued with two parts of water, but being a small ship it was unofficially accepted that the rations were left neat. Each messdeck drew their rum ration and served it in their mess. It became the custom, again unofficially, that on the birthday of a crew member who was a 'Grog' rating the other members from that mess deck would donate 'sippers' for the birthday lad.

On one of the seamen's messes was a young Geordie lad (born in Newcastle upon Tyne) who gathered 'sippers' from about 15 other messmates. After celebrating his birthday with the 'sippers' somebody made a remark to him that made him go berserk. His messmates decided to shut him in the Paint Locker adjacent to their messdeck and locked the door by closing the watertight lever clips. The Geordie threw paint pots stored there against the bulkheads and after a while his messmates decided to see what damage he had done. When the last clip was undone the Geordie burst into the mess, grabbed a fire axe from its holder on the bulkhead and started to chase the crew. He cleared lower deck with crew members being chased by the axe-wielding Geordie. At this time I was tidying up and locking the rum away in the store before collecting my lunch from the kitchen galley. I sat down to eat the meal when suddenly a couple of dozen crew members came chasing through pursued by the axe-man. I dived under the table, and fortunately did not become the target of the pursuer. The matter was referred to the Officer of the Day whose response was 'Well stop him'.

After some ten minutes of chasing all around the ship three hefty seamen decided to disarm the Geordie and were able to wrestle him to the ground and sat on him until they were able to control any further disturbance. They managed to get him to the Sick Bay and lashed him to the bed with ropes so he was unable to move. The Geordie fell asleep and on waking four hours later stated he knew nothing about what had happened. He was put on a charge for being drunk and disorderly behaviour and was awarded '14 days stoppage of leave and rum'. As we were at sea for the next 14 days it was really no hardship as his messmates allowed him to draw a tot from the mess daily rum issue.

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