

Operation Gzira



2013 saw the ceremonial burial at sea of the old crossed Juliets. The badge has been replaced by a new design to reflect the all encompassing integrated ops room branch. The fact that it resembles a signal flag on a pole being flushed down a toilet has been clearly overlooked by the powers to be. Its passing is somewhat symbolic of the destruction of the proud history that was buntingry. And so we mourned its demise... on Saturday 24th August 2013, the largest contingent of buntings seen for many a while assembled in Southampton in lamenting the dear old badge that we all proudly wore.

Background

In 1963, a farewell ceremony was held in the Granada Bar, Gzira, Malta, attended by many signalmen from the Fleet, together with Rear Admiral Viscount Kelburn, Flag Officer Malta; Capt Roaber Mackenzie, Capt D7; and Cdr Brian Shattock, FCO. A signalman's gold badge was duly cremated in a chalice of flaming ormg juice and 'buried' with a suitable headstone.

Many years later, Biff Burns and a colleague set out to find the 'grave' while alongside in Malta, but with no luck.

"To our disappointment we found an old overgrown pub back garden full of rubble," said Biff. "The stone had apparently been destroyed quite a few years back."

Biff decided that another ceremony, 50 years later, would be appropriate and set about organising this event. This time it would take place at Spithead, at sea. At least no-one could destroy the site there!

The Operation

An Opgen Alfa was sent to all participants (which brought memories flooding back) detailing the R/V,

"2/INITIAL RV 241000(LOCAL) AUG 13 - THE ADMIRAL SIR LUCIUS CURTIS PUBLIC HOUSE, OCEAN VILLAGE,(REFERENCE POINT - SHIPMATE) ."

The embarkation onboard MV Ocean Scene (OS) was scheduled for 1105-1135, so that left only 1 and a half hours in the pub to meet up and say hello to everyone, and 5 minutes to 'leg it' to the berth. Needless to say the bar was flamin' busy from the off!

Notable RNCA members attending were Carl, Alan Barry, Millar Telfer, Pete Fairchild and Hugh Mailer. The Portsmouth contingent headed by Danny Streather, Pete Saynor, Tiny Little, George Foster and Eddie Holbein.

Also present was 'Andy' Andrews, 76 years old on the very day of this event, who was one of the original 'burial' party along with Pete Fairchild.

OS set sail from Ocean Village with 180 serving and ex-serving bunting tossers, along with Commodore Jamie Miller CBE RN and the Padre, the Revd Honey-Morgan RN embarked. The Passage Plan took in the River Itchen with a marine police escort, complete with blue flashing lights, then on to sea via Southampton North Channel before reaching Spithead (Ref point 'Juliet') for the ceremony.

The service commenced with words and prayers from the padre, following by a rousing rendition of Jerusalem (thank goodness for backing tracks!). The Commodore gave a very good speech which, on completion, Danny Streather said a few words in reply. Both were funny and very very true....

An archway was made by two people with semaphore Juliets and Tiny little, casket and shackle in hand, stood ready between them whilst the committal music played before letting go of the branch No.1s badge of the late Chris Rickard.

After a period of reflection, the 'Buntings Lord's Prayer' was recited by all.

On completion, the OS proceeded to Portsmouth Harbour for a dockyard tour following the US Navy submarine USS Virginia, and taking in such sights as some T45 Destroyers.

The boat then 'bimbled' back to Ocean Village, Southampton, allowing plenty of time for the completion of long winded but enjoyable dits, with the occasional entertainment provided by the assembled taking place. We arrived back at approx. 1800 (I say that, because I couldn't focus on the watch face, but it looked about right).

After a muddled and confused disembarkation, some went back to the pub (ref point 'shipmate'), some went home, some went directly to the private function room booked at the Dolphin hotel, and some did both! This was an inspired addition to the day's events which softened the blow to wives and girlfriends as they could join in for a few hours (after they had shopped the city dry during the afternoon!). The occasional entertainment from Biff, in his other magical persona of Adamcadabra was well received!

Unfortunately, any chance of 'joined up' conversations deteriorated as the evening progressed, but all seemed to enjoy themselves.

Did I enjoy it; Was it worth it? You bet your life it was. I met people I hadn't seen in yonks and took part in something unique that I shall not forget.

Biff did a wonderful job and should be commended for what turned out to be a fantastic day.

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Image courtesy www.forever-jack.com

Thanks go to www.signaldeck.com, The Navy News, and Biff Burns for information supplied.

For more photographs, quotes and anecdotes, go to www.facebook.com/groups/buntingsafloat2013/