

# Fathomless

**By Dominic Buffery**

They come from the sea, from the frightening and often inhospitable expanses of hurricanes and doldrums; they are empowered with the art of surprise, strength and guile. Through the course of each century they come in their numbers, from the crushing depths and vast open wastes. They hunt the oceans for the next shipwreck, the luckless captains in command of sound or worm-ridden hulls, and they continue to come ashore, relentless and deadly.

From an early age I discovered their immense power and, utterly beguiled, began a maritime career in the hope that one day I would discover their origins.

My secondary-modern schooling had lapsed rapidly into days of tedium; the teacher's seemingly non-caring, though on reflection I was wrong. Education is a two way street and when willingly given, as indeed it was, I should have had the grace to willingly accept. However, along with two like-minded individuals we departed the educational system for a life at sea that would take us on separate voyages of varying time spans and magnitude.

Both parents realised my mind was set on an ocean career, proven further by the amputation of my little toe. Once brother to the row on my right foot, then broken beyond redemption in the school gymnasium, and without medical attention the bone reset askew. I vividly recall a certain sports master ordering yours truly to stuff my foot back into my shoe and told to hurry along for fear of missing the last bus home. I at the time believed that his tough rugby attitude was

something I should simply accept. I limped for a while but soon adjusted to the disfigurement. However, several years later the Admiralty deemed an amputation necessary as a quick remedy to allow me entry into the 1971 autumn enrollment. So off it came and off I went, a lad not yet sixteen, to become a junior rating.

It was the winter of 71, and in the glorious hours before sunrise with frost numbing our faces, we marched routinely to the breakfast hall with Government Issue plastic mugs in hand to savour the stewed tea and powdered coffee, but at least it was warm. On entering the hall we were met by the whiff of stewed vegetables, a repugnant hangover from the previous evening's culinary delights, a far cry from mother's extremely good home cooking. The odour hung in the frigid air of the mess hall and many, if not all noses wrinkled at the effrontery. It seemed that even the scrambled eggs had been impregnated with the seeping odour, reminding me of beached kelp and other living organisms that come ashore from the depths of our oceans.

HMS Ganges was a shore base for the sole purpose of early training, and by no means was it a place for the faint at heart, an establishment of little architectural beauty; functional, harsh and often bloody violent. I was jokingly told, after happily signing away the next twelve years of my life, that the infamous prison island of Alcatraz had a more clement weather pattern, and the discipline only a tad more brutal, perhaps true in part, and yet to this day Ganges has a deep seated place in my heart. Alcatraz, like Ganges has long been de-commissioned but to all those who successfully completed time in those hallowed mess-decks, classrooms and halls, I salute you.

Early training was designed of course to re-condition the young mind in readiness for transfer into the mainstream service, and for the most part that was no bad thing, however Ganges sometimes had its own form of discipline, far removed from the Admiralty manual. Some lads believed themselves men, but were soon reduced to stifling their crying after lights out, fearful the bullies might hear... and believe me, the bullies were always listening. Then there were the PO's

and badge boys, a dedicated bunch of individuals, always willing to mete out their own style of physical education, whether needed or not.

It seemed, for a while at least, that I had made a terrible mistake, that we had somehow entered a living hell with all links to family and the outside world forgotten.

For many it was pure misery until they could stand it no longer and left at the first possible opportunity.

However, half way through my initial training a profound change came about. All those with neither the compunction nor aptitude had gone, and those that remained were suddenly treated differently, almost with respect. It was as if a switch had been thrown in the minds of our tutors, PO's and officers, it was of course just another calculated stage in our development. From the very first moment we had stepped across the establishment threshold, we were all being assessed.

'Gentlemen, you may smoke,' was the first indication that things were about to radically improve. Imagine that, being allowed to smoke in class; a far cry from the mindset of today perhaps, but nonetheless it was a most welcome recreational somersault. Suddenly the gymnasium, in which I learned the rudiments of pugilism, for the sole reason to vent frustration and anger, seemed less important. Even my beloved rifle practice began to take second place. Suddenly I had to recall all mathematics learned in the secondary modern classroom.

'Sonar, gentlemen,' we were instructed, 'will not only prevent your ship from having a torpedo slammed into its side but that we could take the offensive, to become the hunter.' Overnight we had become important; our training had sudden meaning.

On occasion, and in what little free time we were allocated, I could be found down on the shoreline in amongst the WW11 gun emplacements. I would sit for as long as time would allow, writing a letter home or simply staring out to sea, fascinated by the surf crashing into the defences, forever wondering what lay over the horizon. I couldn't wait to find out.

At the grand old age of sixteen and a half it was time to say farewell to HMS Ganges, and like most I was more than ready to move on. However, as the coach departed for Ipswich station we, all to a boy, took a long look back at what had been a place of hell, humour, friendship and learning.

HMS Vernon was what a sixth form college would have been to a school leaver, and it was there that yours truly studied Seamanship and Sonar. Vernon was an austere establishment of red brick and tall multi-glazed white window frames, typical of Portsmouth's naval bases. But shore leave, home leave and pay rises reminded us that we had journeyed a long way from those initial eleven months of training at Ganges, that we were being groomed as active ratings, soon to be assigned our first ships.

Shore base training came to an eventual end and you can imagine my controlled excitement, not to mention a degree of trepidation, on receiving orders for imminent sea time aboard HMS Russell, an ancient Leopard class, type 41 Frigate, to which I went a willing, somewhat eager part of the ships complement. But at long last I was going to sea.

'Storm-force eight and increasing,' was the buzzword aboard the Russell as we slipped our moorings and showed our rudder to the Cornish coast. We were soon passing the southern tip of Ireland on our starboard side as we slipped silently into the great Atlantic. I remember how it dawned on me that nothing but Deep Ocean lay between us and America. Not such a big deal perhaps, but quite a benchmark for a boy who until that point had only sailed a rubber dinghy on the municipal duck pond.

We had received warnings of hostile weather coming at us from the Atlantic's watery wastes, and she was to prove most faithful to her troublesome reputation. The ships bows began shouldering the darkening waters until she rose and fell through what I thought were alarming degrees. And night descended like a cloak.

If not at the consuls in the sonar control room, part of my watch was that of bridge-wing lookout, and it was there I had my first real taste, quite literally, of the sea. It was if the world had gone mad and I recall laughing foolish boyhood challenges into the lashing wind with adrenalin making fine company. I was in utter awe, and thankfully out of earshot.

Eventually relieved from the bridge-wing watch I received an order to go below and find the galley mess deck for food. However this Type 41 was without modern stabilising management systems, and she rolled as far as she pitched. A valiant ship I thought later, alas gone to the yard, but as she yawed and listed, so too did this inexperienced rating, struggling like a gangly arachnid in a rolling tin can. Other personnel on board however seemed to positively stroll past my landlubber efforts, one so effortlessly that I was bound to turn and watch him amble along the passageway. It was as if the bloody show-off was on a jaunt.

Taking one's eye off the course so to speak is not recommended in such an environment and as I turned in search of the elusive mess-deck I discovered just how unforgiving an unclad overhead pipe knuckle can truly be on an unprotected cranium. Dazed and confused, I struggled aft and when all other routes had been ponderously exhausted did I then find the elusive galley. Needless to say I must have appeared in rather a sorry state, and it certainly wasn't the entrance I would have wished, catapulted by a particular spiteful surge into the eating throng. Expecting nothing but derision at my woeful sea legs I was pleasantly surprised to be offered a seat as one of the medics inspected the growing lump on my head. With little damage done I was soon in amongst the off-watch crew, wolfing down what was truly passable food. It was another benchmark. I discovered a ships crew becomes a union, moving and working collectively with no one person, officer or rating, wilfully left behind, the next man being able to depend on you, as you would he. Camaraderie perhaps, but one thing's for certain-it's an unspoken law recognised by all those who answer the call of the sea.

Such was my initiation aboard one of Her Majesty's warships, in which I discovered two things. Firstly that I never suffered from seasickness. Secondly that an even deeper respect grew for what on occasion can be the most dangerous place on earth.

HMS Achilles was my next ship, a proud Leander Class Anti Submarine Frigate in which I would serve primarily in the North Atlantic assigned to the Fishery Protection Program. Most will remember it as the Cod War, a profound difference of opinion between Iceland and the UK regarding the extensions of the much sought after fishing grounds. Holding no lofty view and leaving politics aside, it was for me the greatest opportunity to witness first hand some of the most daring feats of deep water seamanship. We were sent north to give our fishing fleet protection; the Royal Navy assigned the task of fending off a flotilla of Icelandic gunboats with bows filled with concrete for the sole purpose of ramming our vessels. They were also equipped with drogue anchors designed to cut through the netting lines of our ocean going trawlers. It was often a game of daring maneuvers, trying to second-guess an extremely dogged opponent. There were numerous collisions and men on both sides could only wonder upon their fate should their ship founder. After one such confrontation a dry humored Sub-Lieutenant told me that should a man fall into those seas he had just three minutes to survive; as it would take the Achilles at least eight to turn about, given that a person been seen, it didn't need advanced mathematics or a vivid imagination to calculate the outcome. I of course, thanked the officer for that particular little gem of comfort.

It was a force eleven into which we next sailed, a particularly violent storm but not uncommon for those mid-winter waters. We were escorting the MFV (motor fishing vessel) Talagonian on her return to Blyth. The bridge wing was deemed too dangerous for manning, and as lookout I was thankfully ensconced in the warm orderly confines of the bridge.

Keeping visual contact with the fisherman was no easy task. The sea was gigantic with wind driven spume making visibility difficult, if not periodically impossible. Nonetheless, I am proud to say that I maintained contact for several hours, constantly reporting her bearing. Then, and without

warning, she disappeared. I had momentarily disengaged to take receipt of a mug of tepid tea, and on return the Talagonian had gone without trace. Her stern and masthead lights had vanished and all that could be seen were the rolling backs of monstrous waves, dark as charcoal bearing relentlessly down on her last position. Her lights had been hugely comforting in that utterly bleak, heaving world, but they had gone. I reported 'contact lost' and concern creased the First Officer's forehead as he scanned the heaving sea through polished lenses. 'Anything on radar?' he said calmly and the reply of 'no contact' filled the bridge with a chilling reality check.

'Achilles to MFV Talagonian, are you receiving?' The transmission was repeated numerous times, but after each tap, nothing but ominous static.

Now we were searching in earnest with radar, RT and binoculars, with me and the Officer of the Watch clinging to the storm lashed rail on the open wing, scanning the darkness for the merest glimpse.

Achilles turned about under the orders of our commander and captain who had now been called to the bridge, a tricky maneuver in such seas, but we came about with professional alacrity to search those inhospitable co-ordinates.

Achilles' bows rose high into the slate grey sky. The sea disappeared beneath us, but as we pitched into the opposite swell it seemed the entire ocean had come aboard. Colossal waves poured along the top deck, hunting for open hatches or foolhardy crew. Thankfully there were none.

I realised that what I'd been searching for had been found, in part at least; an environment so dangerous and yet so utterly enthralling, a sea of such power upon which man and machine could so easily be humbled, and that none could ever master.

The last reported position of the Talagonian was reached, but the co-ordinates were barren of any topside life, however we were far from ready to give up.

Continuing the search, the valiant Achilles pitched and rolled alarmingly, and below nothing that wasn't stowed remained static. My mug of tea went west, as did everyone else's and we clung on to the freezing bridge wing.

There was tangible relief when an update from the radar op informed us that contact had been re-established three miles due south along our original course. Visibility was practically zero and it wasn't until leaving the wing that I became truly aware of the needle sharp rain and numbing cold. The inner bridge was momentarily the most comforting place on earth.

We made the best time that conditions allowed and were soon bearing down on the small but highly significant blip on the green translucent radar screen. Peering through the armoured glass and thrashing wipers we eventually saw the Talagonian's mast and stern lights, mockingly bright. Throughout the search she had been in the lee-side of a gigantic wave, pushed along like a giant surfboard generating economical speed and smoother passage. It was a commendable piece of seamanship, but no less worrying for us the escort. Eventually she had to break out to maintain her correct heading and had crashed over the opposite wave to appear high on the spume-lashed crest. We followed the Talagonian's stern until we had chased her down and drew parallel some hundred meters apart. In the stark illumination of the Achilles' searchlights it was apparent that the fisherman's radio mast had not fared well in the storm accounting for the radio silence.

So there she was in an environment most hostile with waves more relentless than a pack of hunting wolves, and yet what astonished me most in all that turmoil was the Talagonian's crew. Caught in the beam, we could see them preparing the nets and securing the hatches into which the last catch had gone, the winches, decks and marker buoys being made ready for the next trawl. Some of the crew even found time to wave at us across the storm swept water as if on a bloody cruise. It occurred to me at the time, and still does to this day, that what I saw that night was the stuff of maritime legend. I would never take another piece of battered cod for granted again, that might sound a tad flippant, but believe me it's not meant that way at all.

Over the years I went on to experience many adventures on the world's oceans, and at every given opportunity I still sail miles offshore to fish or just navigate a high sea, which brings me back to the opening page of this true tale.

As I have said, they come from the sea, from those fascinating and often inhospitable expanses of hurricanes and doldrums. They come in their numbers from fathomless depths and heaving wastes, unstoppable and dangerous.

Folklore, myths and legends of the sea are to which I refer. The Kraken, The Marie Celeste, Blackbeard, The Cruel Sea, Titanic, The Indispose Adventure and so many more wonderful tales and chilling truths, etched in the hearts and minds of every generation.

It is only a matter of time before the oceans of the world send another.

**End**