

SHARKEY WARD & THE BLACK & WHITE SQUIRRELS

Of all the characters I ever met in the Royal Navy and quite a few springs readily to mind. The 'Psycho' Deacons, 'Brunswick' Gribbens, Dixie Deans, 'Smudger' Smiths together with countless others, too numerous to mention. There was of course the inimitable 'Sharkey' Ward.

'Sharkey' Ward was a 'Stoker' from the Old Navy of a bygone age and typical of men from this particular generation. He was called many names most of which were sometimes uncomplimentary. 'Piss Head' 'Rum Rat' 'Dipso' 'Plonky' 'Alky' being among the most common and there is no denying that 'Sharkey' was an enigma. On his Watch in the Engine Room he was matchless. Ashore, he could be an absolute pain in the arse. Everyone that I knew had a soft spot for 'Sharkey' and he was generally held in great affection and indeed tolerance. Without doubt 'Sharkey' was an alcoholic who simply would not hurt a fly, 98% of the time that is. I have, on rare occasions see him get out of his pram when he could be a real handful if he had a mind to. I first met 'Sharkey' on HMS Albion in early 1955 when we were both 'Under Punishment'. We got to know each other pretty well as both of us made occasional visits to the 'Commander's Table' rarely for 'Requestmen' either.

During a visit to Aden, we were given 'One Watch Leave' my oppo 'Smed' Smedley and I decided to have a 'Quiet Rabbit Run'. Moving casually from Bar to Bar as one does in the circumstances, we came across 'Sharkey' in a local 'Grog Shop' totally out of it and in the process of being 'Rolled' by two ragheads. Smed and I didn't even think, we just simply waded in as the two vanished like puffs of smoke. Realising that we could not leave him in the state he was in we hailed a passing 'Fast Black' and took him back onboard. Arriving at the gangway it took the combined efforts of 'Smed' and I, together with the Duty QM and Bosun's Mate to get him back on board where he apparently slept blissfully like a baby and totally unaware of the near mayhem he had caused. All the Regulating Staff were very understanding and sympathetic towards 'Sharkey' who often got away with murder most of the time.

I lost track of 'Sharkey' completely after I left Albion and following a spell at HMS Blackcap, the Royal Naval Air Station, Stretton, I joined HMS Victorious where low and behold, I bumped into old 'Sharkey' again as he became a daily visitor to my 'Messman's Pantry' in the Senior Rates Mess for his morning cuppa and a blather. The summer of 1959 saw Victorious in the United States and as this was to be my last trip before being demobbed; I was determined to make the most of it. We all realised that the trip was to be a most prestigious one when the Skipper cleared lower deck for one of his 'Pep Talks' After docking in the massive Norfolk Virginia Navy Yard alongside the newly launched USS Independence the US Navy's latest carrier, we had 'Ceremonial Divisions' on the jetty and the 'Bootneck Band' did their usual 'Party Piece' to rapturous applause from a huge crowd assembled to welcome us. Most of our ships company were given shore leave and apart from the Duty Part of the Watch and Watch Keepers, the ship was almost deserted. The usual sporting events were taking place ashore and the following day our ship's boxing team of which I was a keen member, earned a very creditable draw with a strong US Navy team and as the ensuing celebrations afterwards were both eventful and strenuous, I was hoping to take it easy for a while.

A knock on my pantry door and the familiar face of RPO Bill Godly head appeared around the door. Bill was affectionately known as 'Uncle Bill' because of his kindly nature and fatherly advice, a rare quality indeed for an RPO. I had been on Albion with Bill a couple of years before and I regarded him as a 'good hand' "I need a big favour JR" He grinned, helping himself to a cup of coffee and a handful of biscuits. "Don't you bloody always"? I replied trying not to sound too sarcastic. Nonplussed, Bill replied. "I need you to do a Shore Patrol with me tonight" He enquired politely. "Why me Uncle Bill" I asked. He grinned again. "I can't remember the last time you wore belt and gaitors"? "I bloody well can" I almost exploded. "You lumbered me with a couple of dockyard mateys on a trip to Tangier" We both laughed as the incident was recalled. "Come on JR, our Crusher Darby Allen's relatives have come to see him and I need a deputy for him"? Darby was another of the good guys so I agreed. "OK then, put me down, I will have to check with the Mess Pres first though"? I replied. "I already have and it's OK, he can spare you for tonight" Bill grinned again. "Uncle Bill, you are craftier than a shithouse rat, what time"? "On the jetty by 1700 dress No 2's white belt and gaitors, you know the drill"? He bawled, disappearing out of the door to avoid a well aimed bread roll.

At 1700 fully 'booted and spurred' we were all mustered on the jetty. Ship's Landrover at the ready, Uncle Bill and I, 'Dusty' Rhodes an AB made up the Patrol. Uncle Bill duly issued the 'nightsticks' to hang on our webbing belts together with our NP armbands. "Right lads, let's roll" Said Uncle Bill as we all clambered aboard our transport for the evening "And by the way, Sharkey's ashore" Added Uncle Bill as an afterthought. I groaned inwardly as Dusty innocently enquired, "Who's Sharkey"? "Better you don't know" Said Bill grimly, more in hope than offering an answer. Pausing at the US Naval Provost Marshall's HQ near the Main Dockyard Gate we received our briefing and issued with a two way radio and instructions that the Driver remain with the vehicle at all times. We also got a road map and information sheet containing likely trouble spots. In the event of major trouble we were to summon immediate assistance by radio. Should any British Matelots be involved we would be informed ASAP.

It really was a lovely evening and no trouble was expected particularly as the Yanks had once again 'pulled out all the stops' to ensure a good visit. Our Ship's Company had taken full advantage of the hospitality afforded by the USO (United Services Organisation) and a lot of the local bars were offering beer at reduced prices. We had already been informed that no spirits are served in the bars as Virginia is a 'dry state' but Uncle Bill just had to sarcastically remind me of the fact by recalling a recent experience at the hands of local 'bootleggers' We made several stops during our patrol including visits to the local 'cat houses' but everyone seemed to be behaving admirably and not 'letting the side down' Norfolk Virginia was a huge area mainly devoted to military personnel. There were Naval Air Stations, Naval Barracks, Marines Barracks, Coastguard Bases and a huge Military Hospital. There was also the Virginia State College where a big dance was being held to welcome the Royal Navy. Virginia was surely one of America's most beautiful states with picturesque scenery and steeped in history. There was Jamestown and the site of the first Colonists in 1607 where the residents of the perfectly constructed replica settlement still wore traditional costume of that period as did their counterparts in Williamstown a short distance away. The Adam Thorogood House was constructed of imported English bricks in 1636 and nearby Fort Monroe there was a replica of the American Civil War ironclad warships 'Monitor and 'Merrimac' in 1862. The Confederate President Jefferson Davis was also held prisoner here in 1865. Not to be missed was the Chesapeake Bay area, Ocean

View, Azalea Park, Hampton Roads and Newport News. Many of these clung staunchly to their British roots and traditions of a bygone age. This probably accounted for the tremendous welcome we received when we docked at the Naval Base. Other attractions included the Portsmouth Toll Tunnel linking Norfolk mainland costing 25 cents. The Jordan Bridge linked the Dockyard to the mainland over the Elizabeth River. Many of the names had a familiar sound such as Portsmouth and Gosport. There were also Dances on the Portsmouth side where we were mainly to patrol at the Naval Hospital and Portsmouth Boat Club.

Around 2330 we received a radio message from the US Naval Base HQ that there was an English Sailor believed to be drunk lying on a bench in the Oak Grove Cemetery about a mile away from the Naval Hospital. "Here we go" Said Uncle Bill "I thought it was too good to be true, I bet a pound to a pinch of shit it's Sharkey" It took us about 10 minutes to reach the Cemetery gates and waiting for us was the 'Park Keeper' who was waiting to lock up and two Police Officers with their traditional 'Stetson Hats' and revolvers. "Has he been any trouble?" Enquired Uncle Bill. "Hell No, he's been just fine, I guess he's just had a little bit too much to drink that's all" Replied one of the Officers smiling. "We need to close up the Cemetery" The Park Keeper pointed to a sleeping figure about 50 yards away whom Bill and I immediately recognised as 'Sharkey' His head was resting on his cap and he was snoring loudly. Strewn around nearby were some empty cans of Budweiser and the remains of a hamburger bun. "We'll all stay here while you wake him up" Suggested one of the Officers" wisely I thought under the circumstances as Sharkey could be a trifle awkward sometimes. "Better let me do it Bill" I said. "He knows me and there shouldn't be a problem" Bill nodded. As I approached the sleeping 'Sharkey' I became aware of the most obnoxious stench I have ever encountered. It was so overpowering it almost made you want to wretch. "Bloody Hell Bill, whatever is that stink"? Bill sniffed and so did Dusty. "Gawd Almighty, I think he's shit himself. As we approached closer the stench coming from the loudly snoring figure was almost unbearable. I examined Sharkey with the powerful torch borrowed from one of the Police Officers but I could not see any obvious signs of anal activity. "No he hasn't Bill, he's clean" I observed. Ignoring the stench I gently shook Sharkey's shoulder. "Come on Sharks old mate it's me JR, wakey wakey old son, the Bobbies are here" Perhaps it was the mention of Bobbies which seemed to penetrate as Sharkey suddenly woke up "Whassermarrer" he mumbled. "It's OK lads, I'm no bother" Sharkey mumbled again rubbing his eyes and gazing up at us. Bill came nearer holding his nose. "Sharkey, it's me Bill Godley, what is that f.....g stink"? He enquired. "What f.....g stink, I can't smell anything" Sharkey retorted. "Come on mate, they are waiting to close up" Said Bill shining the torch into Sharkey's bleary eyes. "Where the f..k am I yawned Sharkey"? "You're in the Cemetery Buddy" Remarked one of the Policemen who had just joined us at a discreet distance.

Sharkey practically leapt off the bench "Cemetery, f.....g hell, what am I doing here"? He demanded indignantly suddenly quite sober, he began to pick up the discarded beer cans and toss them into a nearby waste bin. He picked up his cap and jammed it onto his head. "Sorry Buddy, you're going to have to leave, the Janitor has to close up" Replied the second Policeman. "Sharkey, what is that f.....g stink" ? Enquired Bill again, still holding his nose. One of the Policemen ventured an opinion. "It's a goddam skunk, that's what it is" We all looked totally mystified. "It's a what" enquired Bill. "Yep" agreed the other Officer. "It's a skunk alright, there is no smell on earth like it" We all agreed that none of us had ever smelled anything so dreadful. We all made our way outside the Cemetery gates which were quickly locked by the Janitor who no doubt gratefully hurried away. "Has anyone any idea

as to how we are going to get rid of this bloody stink” Asked Bill. “I’m afraid you’re going to have to burn that uniform, there’s no way that you can wash it out.” One of the Officers suggested. “And you’ll need to get a disinfectant scrub in hot water too” Agreed the other Policeman as they laughingly departed. “Where the bloody hell are we going to get him another uniform at this time of night”? Dusty enquired. “I’ve got an idea” Said Bill after a little thought. “We could ask the US Provost Base, they must have had this problem before. We all agreed that this was a good idea apart from Sharkey who was still confused about the skunk and kept muttering to himself. Bill left us and went to the Landrover to call the US Base whilst Dusty and I stayed with a now almost sober Sharkey. “How the bloody hell did you get involved with a skunk Dusty and I demanded to know. Sharkey was momentarily deep in thought and shrugging his shoulders replied. “ I didn’t know they were f.....g skunks did I, I’ve never seen one before, I was sitting there drinking my beer and eating my hamburger when a bunch of em came up to me so I gave them some of my hamburger and one of the little bastards pissed on me. I felt a bit tired so I got my head down. I didn’t know I was in a f.....g Cemetery did I for f...k sake”? Dusty and I were finding it hard not to burst out laughing as Bill rejoined us. “I think we are in luck lads, the Provost Police keep a stock of spare uniforms for emergencies and if one will fit Sharkey he can have it” We bundled a protesting Sharkey into the luggage seat of the Landrover and minutes later we arrived back at the US Provost HQ.

The Yanks shouted to us from a safe distance that there was a ‘Decontam’ Block at the back where Sharkey should strip and shower. There was also a carbolic cleanser which smelled like Jeyes Fluid. “I guess a couple of scrubs and shower will get rid of most of it and there’s clean towels and uniform on the seat in there” Yelled the Provost Sergeant as another American voiced called out “Just toss your uniform in the yard and we will incinerate them”? Meanwhile we took advantage of a most welcome cup of coffee. Some ten minutes later a very sheepish and better smelling Sharkey emerged from the changing room dressed in a set of US Navy ‘Skivvy Shirt’ and trousers still clutching his cap. A very suspicious Bill sniffed him closely. “F..k me Sharkey you still smell a bit like a ‘Dry Dock Shit Bucket but I have to say a damm sight better than you did” He exclaimed. The US Provost Staff indicated their approval at Sharkey’s freshly scrubbed look. Looking at my watch I nudged Bill who nodded. It was 0200 and we had been on duty for eight hours. Bill thanked the Yanks as he handed back the radio. “If you’re off duty now guys there’s a couple of beers out back”? Thanking them again but declining despite the protests of Sharkey claiming that he had been ‘Seen Off’ we invited them back onboard for a ‘Whet’ later that day. Returning to Victorious the Master at Arms and Duty RPO were still waiting on the Main Gangway to check on stragglers. As we made our weary way up the gangway and over the brow with Bill in the lead and Sharkey bringing up the rear, the Jossman sniffed him closely. “I know that you’re sober Sharkey and you’re out of the f.....g rig of the day and I wont even ask why but you smell like a skunk’s scrotum” He snarled. Sharkey drew himself up and with his face only inches from the Jossman’s replied indignantly. “Please Joss, don’t ever mention that animal again” He almost whispered. “I thought it was a f.....g black and white squirrel honestly”? Grabbing his Station Card and muttering to himself, Sharkey disappeared below. Turning to Bill the totally mystified Jossman enquired “What on earth is he talking about Bill” Bill merely shook his head sadly. “Master, if I tried to explain, you’d never believe it would he lads” as we made our way down to the Regulating Office.

**SOMEONE ONCE SAID WHEN THE LEGEND SURPASSES THE TRUTH
PRINT THE LEGEND. MEN LIKE SHARKEY ARE THEMSELVES LEGENDS**

