

## THE PERFECT 'PARTY MEMBER'

For any former members of HM Forces it should not be too difficult to remember how significant such words as subterfuge, flannel, skiving, swinging the lead, fiddling or even possibly being somewhat economical with the actual facts were recognisably commonplace terminology. Particularly so in the Royal Navy when one learned very quickly that transgressions followed by unscheduled visits to the 'Captain's or Commanders Table' resulted in often unpleasant repercussions in the form of 'punishments' or as one of my old Master At Arms chose to refer to as 'Punitive Consequences'

Even from the early days of 'Initial Training' when I was unceremoniously introduced to the mysteries of 'The Table' for being 'adrift' or late back from leave. The Captains or Commanders must have despaired at the often pathetic excuses offered by the miscreant as he 'Doffed His Cap' at 'The Table' It is rumoured that the late Commander John Moore of the Royal Naval Barracks Portsmouth, who apparently kept a log of 'excuses' offered to show leniency if an excuse, which he had never heard before, were offered.

Relatively, minor offences varied from stoppage of leave or pay which was accepted by the perpetrators without rancour and Men under Punishment would muster 'out of hours' to perform rifle or foot drill or carry out extra work. When the Ship's Company had finished work for the day or 'secured' Men under Punishment would be piped over the 'tannoy' to muster for their allotted extra tasks.

My earliest recollection of being under punishment was at HMS Gamecock a Fleet Air Arm Shore Establishment near Nuneaton in Warwickshire. These Shore Bases were often referred to as 'Stone Frigates' Gamecock was a Training Establishment for all Fleet Air Arm personnel where they learned the basics of Naval life and underwent 'Foundation Trade Training' This Part One Training usually lasted for approximately 15 or 16 weeks and following this the trainees were selected for further training in their respectively selected trades.

My first introduction to 'Punishment' involved extra work during the evenings or 'Dog Watches' in the Senior Rates Mess and involved cleaning, polishing, washing up and other menial chores. My mentor, on this occasion was an old 3 Badge former Leading Seaman who we called 'Stripey'. Stripey had more campaign medals than Lord Louis Mountbatten with whom he had served during the Second World War. Stripey had been stripped of his rate as Leading Seaman for some transgression or other but had been drafted to Gamecock to finish his service in the Royal Navy after 30 years. Old Stripey seemed to have been everywhere and done everything and he was adored by everyone who, as I did, adopted him as a 'Sea Daddy'

Such men as 'Old Stripey' are priceless in the Royal Navy as their knowledge and expertise are unsurpassed. He was no exception for even the Senior Rates thought well of him. Stripey had what is called a 'Good Number' or 'Soft Job' and his life on the base was easy. I learned quickly from him the rights and wrongs, how to 'Screw Your Biscuit', 'Stay Shtum' and most of all, how to say 'Yes, Sir Three Bags Full Sir' Stripey's philosophy was simple, whatever job you were doing, do it as well as you can and be respectful to everyone in authority. I can, without hesitation, claim that this was the best piece of advice I was ever given.

With a man like Stripey to give you advice one simply could not go wrong and in my particular case I learned very quickly not to 'buck the system' or 'go against the grain' It is of course quite easy in HM Forces to resent authority of any kind particularly from Senior NCO's particularly if that authority is abused as sometimes it occasionally is and the accepted point of view that all Senior Rates are bastards is widely held. In my case, thanks to Stripey, I never subscribed to that viewpoint at all, in fact quite the contrary as I endeavoured to bring the job of Senior Rates Messman to a fine art and create a bit of an Empire for myself at the same time.

Bearing in mind that Naval Officers have their own specialist Cooks and Stewards I endeavoured to provide the Senior Rates with those hitherto denied little luxuries which the Officer's by virtue of their status had come to expect. I quickly discovered that being under punishment was not entirely disadvantageous as it enabled me to establish contacts with everyone prepared to 'Swap' their own particular fortes or who had reciprocal 'Things to Offer' in exchange.

For example if I ever needed extra supplies or anything for the Senior Rates Messes to ensure the smooth running and maintain the essential qualities to assist their Social Status I merely spoke to the Mess President or respective Chief who provided a 'Chit' to allow me to obtain the item in question. In this way I could practically guarantee a successful 'Barter System' between Cooks, Stewards or anyone who could mutually benefit from the voluntary exchange of goods. As a respectable and trustworthy Messman, one of my tasks would be to assist as a member of the General Mess Party whose principal job was to provision the ship or establishment on a daily basis. Needless to say the odd case of tinned milk, tea, sugar or coffee was able to be re-circulated without too much trouble and which could be exchanged at a later date. Quite a number of my Senior Rates did not use their rum or cigarette ration and the Mess President was able to exchange these items for something which would benefit the mess in general. This proved to be an ideal currency and which allowed me to provide those extra comforts which the Senior Rates found hard to resist.

The very first time I used this new found skill of 'Mutual Manipulation' was at HMS Curlew, the Royal Naval Air Station at St Merryn in Cornwall. At this time St Merryn was the home of the Fleet Air Arm's Ordnance School, having moved from Yeovilton a few months earlier. It was here that I decided my intended career as an Armourer was not for me I quickly became a 'Misfit General Dutyman' and in the meantime assigned to the Senior Rates Mess as permanent Messman until such time that I was returned to Lee-on-Solent for eventual re-categorisation. Fortunately for me my Boss, the Mess President who insisted on being called 'Mac' was one of those rare beings whom one could instantly like and everyone adored him, particularly when I managed to rescue him from a rather embarrassing incident on his Birthday which involved a rather nasty Junior Officer who disliked him intensely and insisted on knowing his whereabouts. Fortunately the Officer, who was rather gullible, accepted my story that Mac was engaged on a very important errand for the Commander. As a result Mac was most grateful and henceforth I could do no wrong. By a strange coincidence when I returned to Lee-on-Solent as part of the 'Station Security Guard, Mac followed me again as Mess President and rescued me from my humdrum job to install me as Senior Rates Messman once again when the 'Status Quo' was resumed until I went to HMS Siskin at Fort Rowner, Gosport on an AH3's Course.

After Siskin a draft to HMS Albion followed and a 3 month stint of duty on the flight Deck gave way once again to yet another spell as Senior Rates Messman which I relished more

than usual as the Senior Rates were more appreciative of life's little luxuries during their time at sea and an added bonus for me was the addition of a number of my old Chiefs who had been recently drafted from Lee. On Albion it was customary for all Flight Deck personnel to interchange duties every three months if they so wished. In my case I allowed myself to be quite easily persuaded to remain as Senior Rates Messman as the 'Perks' were irresistible. With the 'Mutual Barter and Exchange' system in full flow I was able to provide 'Birthday Bonuses' and an excellent Laundry Service, courtesy of our Chinese civilian staff who proved to be real 'Rum Rats' and quite easy to please. One of the best deals I made cost me a case of 'Lime Juice' which I exchanged for the biggest coffee pot I had ever seen from a 'Dockyard Matey' working in Gibraltar Dockyard. The coffee pot was always bubbling away in my Pantry and the fascinating aroma of fresh coffee, rolls and biscuits drew Officers and Senior Rates like a magnet for unofficial 'Stand Easy's' throughout the day and provided loads of priceless 'Scuttlebut' to exchange. Even Commander Air himself was a fairly regular caller at my Pantry.

One of my best oppos was a Leading Officer's Steward called Leo who could always be prevailed upon to provide those little home comforts enjoyed by his Officers in exchange for hard to come by commodities and together we formed quite a formidable partnership. Our 'Network' included just about everyone who could be useful to 'The Organisation' and included Cooks, Stewards, Seamen, Stokers and Royal Marines. No one was ignored and our motto was quite simply 'If you need anything, we can supply it' our currency was rum, cigarettes, tobacco, tea, coffee, sugar, milk, beer, food. Nothing was overlooked. Our domain included the 'Ship's Laundry' which allowed everyone clean gear every day. Messmen received an extra £5 each month from Mess Funds which increased as the Petty Officer's Mess and Regulators were included. As my duties increased I had to insist on 2 or 3 men 'Part of Ship' or Under Punishment to help out.

A typical day for me seldom varied at all when at sea. I was usually woken at 0600 by one of the Watchkeepers on duty. A quick shower and shave then to the Senior Rates Dining Hall to 'lay up' for breakfast at 0700. Breakfast over, cleared away and Dining Hall re-laid for Lunch then back to my Pantry. Fresh coffee on to brew, it was time to clear up the Senior Rates Mess. Lavender Polish on the decks followed by a quick 'bumper' then collect and deliver the daily laundry. On the way back collect the fresh rolls, ham and cheese for 'Morning Stand Easy' Prepare the messdeck, coffee and 'Stand Easy Eats' by 1000. A quick chat with the Mess President re Birthdays etc. Clear away Stand Easy and tidy Pantry. Arrange things with Leo and help General Mess party to provision ship. Prepare fresh brew of coffee. Collect Senior Rate's Rum from Spirit Room. Up Spirits and Hands to Dinner at 1300. Clear Dining Hall. Prepare for afternoon Stand Easy. Collect sausage rolls and sandwiches. Stand Easy at 1500. Clear away and tidy mess. Collect laundry and leave on bunks. Evenings at sea in the Senior Rates Mess were often a good laugh with almost a daily Birthday. There was the customary cake, courtesy of one of our Chefs followed by a finger buffet by kind permission of the Wardroom Chefs & Stewards. Our Mess President owned a 35 mm Bell & Howell Film Projector and our own NAAFI Canteen Manager had a good stock of films which were exchanged when visiting a port or brought onboard by the Mail Plane. There were a few 'Blue Films' doing the rounds which were liberally swapped throughout the ship. As an added treat there was always a bottle of 'Pusser' Rum' saved from the daily rations or a bottle of spirits supplied by Leo with no questions asked to supplement the Beer Ration so all in all the evenings were fairly lively.

Occasionally when visiting a foreign port I acted as MSO Messenger to deliver confidential mail from the ship to the C in C's Office. This was a wonderful opportunity to further 'Our Trade' commitments and no potential was overlooked. One such little money spinner was cigarette lighters and perfume which could be purchased very cheaply and re-sold at a considerable profit back in the UK. Another popular source of trade were gallon demijohns of real West Indian Rum stockpiled in Gibraltar by courtesy of a local trader who had access to the Dockyard in exchange for tea and lime juice.

Recalling the words of 'Old Stripey' back in Training days at Bramcote, whose advice never to discount any possibility for an opportunity to trade and 'Should you know something about someone, always keep it to yourself but let them know that you know' proved to be very good advice indeed particularly in the case of one of my old Master At Arms who asked me to provide food and liquid libation for an old shipmate whilst visiting Bombay. It transpired that his guest was female and strictly against the rules. He was both grateful and appreciative of my silence and discretion and subsequently he returned the favour many times over by turning a 'Blind Eye' to many of our activities which although not strictly 'Kosher' benefited everyone and helped considerably to ease the burden of life at sea.

The days of Albion were soon over in late 1956 and a preference draft to the R.N.A.S Stretton, Warrington or HMS Blackcap beckoned. Two opportunities were on offer, the Fire Station or 'Buffer's / Barrackmaster's Party'. Following a few pints with the 'Buffer' I quickly decided on the latter as the potential for financial advancement seemed endless. The Buffer at Blackcap was CPO 'Buck' Taylor, A Seaman Chief with more than 30 years service in the Royal Navy. Buck had somehow wangled himself a draft chit to Blackcap to finish his time. Buck was a 'Scouser' and lived off base in Liverpool, choosing to commute each day from 0800 to 1700. Buck was a wonderful fellow and liked by everyone from Officers to the lowliest rating. Buck insisted on a quiet life without hassle and was only too pleased to leave the day to day running of the 'Buffer's Party' to someone else who could take care of the paper work and it appeared from our very first meeting that this would be my task.

The principal objective of the 'Buffer's Party' included the systematic dismantling of equipment in preparation for either sale or alternative methods of disposal. Quite a lot of material had already been designated for destruction and part of the Airfield Dispersal Points had daily bonfires. The outlying bunkers, hangars and old storage areas were cleared and their contents disposed of. All obsolete scrap aircraft were being sold off together with airfield rolling stock and everything had to go. This created a tailor made opportunity for the 'Buffer's Party' to earn themselves 'a few bob' and no time was lost in creating outlets. An important contact was made with the Supply Sergeants over at the American Base nearby which led to other contacts and a 'Network' was created. The Yanks were only too pleased to become involved and supplied us with real coffee, foodstuffs and practically anything we needed was flown in regularly from the United States or their other European bases. Our 'Network' began to expand and we found ourselves supplying just about everyone at Blackcap from Officers to other ranks with those little luxuries which were impossible to get in the UK. In return the Americans, who were avid collectors of practically anything British, were supplied with Antiques, Bric a Brac and Pottery from the Factory Shops in Stoke-on-Trent. The Yanks also enjoyed our Duty Free 'Blue Liners' and of course Navy Rum.

As our 'Buffer's Party' provided General Mess Party and Messmen everyone seemed to 'turn a blind eye' to our activities purely for the simple reason that everyone benefited from them and no questions were asked. We had a lucrative 'Meat Trade' every Friday by courtesy of the local Farmers and Butchers who formed part of our growing 'Network' In general terms, anything anyone needed, we could usually supply from one source or another as we had things pretty well sewn up. Everyone in the 'Network' had their own particular perks and we all had a regular 'share out' from our activities. Once each week we dispatched a lorry to collect firewood for the Base and a few bags of coal or coke from a friend at the Railway Goods Yard which we delivered to the Married Quarters to supplement their allowance in return for a small consideration.

The Buffer had a smallholding near the main camp where he kept a few pigs and chickens, which were tended by an old chap in the nearby village and which were fed on left over food from the main dining halls which was boiled up into 'swill'. Everyone on the American Base was entitled to a monthly liquor allowance and any food was obtained from their PX Store on the base by using a ration card. I was extremely fortunate to get hold of the ration cards of Airmen who had returned to the States together with any unclaimed allowances which were either bartered or exchanged during reciprocal visits. Our meeting place was the local pub called the 'Appleton Thorn' where many deals and transactions took place. The local Police were a great bunch ignoring our activities as harmless and occasionally receiving a bottle or pack of cigarettes as a token of our mutual respect.

The Buffer's Party had an important role in the dismantling of the nissen huts and barrack blocks together with the machinery which was officially dumped but unofficially sold to a scrap metal dealer in Manchester, the proceeds being shared fairly equally between 'Our Party' Social activities between the Yanks and the British were extremely good with regular dances being held at both bases and being particularly popular with the local girls who availed themselves of the free transport to and from the bases. The Senior Rates too played their part by saving rum rations or cigarette coupons which were exchanged for other goods. We had a regular shopping service from the Married Quarters for the wives who could not get into town and nothing was overlooked by 'The Network'

The unofficial arrival of an Admiralty/Ministry man allegedly to oversee the procedures in decommissioning the Base caused a momentary hiccup in our activities as the 'Snoop' began to interfere in the smooth running of our 'Operations'. Instructions were to co-operate with him at all costs and conduct him wherever he wanted to go. This latter instruction presented a bit of a problem as there were simply places that we did not want him to go and he began to become annoyed at our obvious delaying tactics. He had a brief case which never left him and he carried it everywhere. The 'Snoop' was becoming a 'real pain in the ass' and something had to be done quickly. This called for an emergency 'Council of War' meeting of 'The Network' members and The Buffer's Party. Various methods were discussed on how to deal with this fellow golden but nothing was actually decided until one day when a seemingly golden opportunity presented itself. On this particular day 'The Snoop' decided to nose around 'off Base' and finding himself wandering around 'The precincts of the Buffer's cherished Piggery' he began to ask some very awkward questions of his escorts one of which was me. As the visit progressed 'The Snoop' decided to explore for himself whilst scribbling little notes in a pocketbook which he always carried. A sudden cry for 'Help' alerted us as we dashed in the direction of the cry. The sight which greeted us caused me to have one of my 'brainwaves' and I realised that this incident could yet be our salvation.

It seemed as though 'The Snoop' had inadvertently wandered off the main pathway and found himself waist deep in the slurry pit which the local 'Allotments Association' regarded as almost sacrosanct to them. Trying desperately hard to stifle our laughter my 'brainwave' began to take shape before our eyes. One of our 'Buffer's Party' had a cousin Molly who lived in a little cottage just 'up the road' from the piggeries. Whispering to one of the lads I outlined my plan and a few minutes later off he dashed to 'prepare the ground' The hapless 'Snoop' whom ironically was named Mr Inkpen was becoming quite distressed in his current environment so with the assistance of a few ropes and willing helpers we managed to extricate him from his predicament with the slurry pit. Once out of the pit we all stood downwind of him as best we could as he absolutely stank to high heaven and I almost felt quite sorry for him. "What am I going to do"? He wailed. "Look at me, I can't go back to the base looking like this can I"? " Never you mind Sir" I said reassuringly "There is a cottage just up the road where we can clean you up" I replied, at the same time giving the lads a wink as the 'penny seemed to drop' "That's right Sir, Miss Molly will fix you up in no time" Suggested one of the lads as they all exchanged knowing glances as we ushered a now much subdued Mr Inkpen towards The Buffer's pick up truck and seated at the extreme end as the stench from him was unbearable. The journey to Molly's cottage was not far and we arrived unseen from prying eyes.

Molly and her cousin were already waiting at the back door and all the lads greeted her warmly, after all, she was practically one of the 'family' to the boys at Blackcap. Molly was a lovely girl with dark hair and eyes, a little plumpish but very pretty aged around 30 ish with a penchant for Sailors. She was extremely fond of all the lads at 'Blackcap' A quick whisper in her ear was acknowledged with a knowing nod. "Now come on Sir, don't be shy, get out of those filthy clothes and I'll wash them for you so put these overalls on for now" She ordered. We decided to make ourselves scarce so we all clambered aboard the truck once again. "I'll give you a call when he's ready" Called Molly as we drove away convulsed with laughter. Molly's hospitality was legendary as was her drinking prowess and none of our crew could beat her in a drinking contest, she was equally famous for her 'Home Brews' and in particular her 'Parsnip' and 'Elderberry' wine. The lads on the Buffer's Party and most of the Base had enjoyed some fantastic week-ends at Molly's cottage. "I don't fancy his chance much" Said one of the lads grinning. "Nor do I" Opined another "He hasn't a hope poor bugger" Suggested a third member of the group.

It was around tea time when Molly rang to say that Mr Inkpen was ready to be picked up at her house so a couple of us took the Land Rover to go and fetch him. When we arrived at Molly's we were met by a now immaculate Mr Inkpen apart from the fact that he seemed rather the worse for wear and it soon became apparent that he had imbibed a little too much of Molly's 'Home Brew' as he kept rolling from side to side as he came to meet us. He and Molly embraced quite affectionately as we lifted him onto the back of the Land Rover. Just time for a quick hug for Molly and a big thank you for helping us out. " I hope he behaved himself Moll" I enquired politely. "Of course" She answered coyly "Once I got all the stiffness out of him and the ink out of his pen" We both roared with laughter as I leapt back into the Land Rover. Good old Molly, bless her heart, I remember thinking, now for the 'Coup de Grace'. On the journey back to Blackcap Mr Inkpen began to quickly recover his composure and sobriety and a quietly whispered conversation between us in the back of the Land Rover did wonders to 'put things in a nutshell' and to clear the air. A rather embarrassed Mr Inkpen was desperate to avoid his escapade becoming public and I naturally assured him that we on the 'Party' were the very souls of discretion. "After all Sir,

we are all men of the world aren't we" I suggested to him. Mr Inkpen seemed to pale a little, either from the effects of Molly's 'Home Brew' or perhaps my suggestion. Dropping him off at the Wardroom Mr Inkpen shook hands warmly and thanked me for our 'frankness and understanding' and informing me that he would be leaving the following morning together with a report that 'HMS Blackcap' was being properly and extremely efficiently decommissioned and that there would be no need for further monitoring by the official bodies in the immediate future' This little incident was a perfect reminder that an opportunity may only occur once and one should always be in a position to take full advantage of it. It prompted me to put pen to paper in the tale of 'Miss Molly & The Ministry Man'

**AND IN THE IMMORTAL WORDS OF OLIVER HARDY 'AND NO ONE WILL EVER BE ANY THE WISER'**