

Chapter 19

HMS Courageous

Wondering what I faced, I reported to Gosport. When I reached the barrack block I found that all the "bods" were out. When they eventually drifted in, I saw one chap who looked very dour and hoped that I would not be working with him. Sure enough, he



turned out to be my Fitter on the Flight Commander's Osprey and his name was John Loader. In truth, he turned out to be an excellent chap and did more than anyone to introduce me to my new life. All the technical men were ex-apprentices so we all understood each other. I was only twenty and easily the youngest. The "Courageous" was in the Atlantic Fleet and wherever it went it was followed by the destroyer HMS Sturdy. This was a safety measure to pick up people if an aircraft was lost overboard. 800 Squadron was a fighter unit and its Flight Commanders had Ospreys, which were the sea versions of the Hawker Hart, whilst the other pilots had Nimrods, sea versions of the Hawker Fury. The Osprey had a turret and carried a Navy Air Gunner. We spent about half of our time at sea and half at RAF Upavon in Wiltshire; it really was the easiest overseas service possible. The good thing about this was, of course, that I was able, from time to time, to go home and see Perle and my family. Perle and I corresponded throughout my time in the Fleet Air Arm and I was very much in love with her. Unknown to me, however, our relationship was coming to an end. On my last leave from Courageous we got engaged on my 21st birthday. At the time we were on holiday at Whitstable staying with Mum, Dad and Betty in a bungalow. I'll never know why she agreed to the engagement because not long afterwards, when I was posted to Andover, I found out that she was seeing someone else. I asked for the ring back and exchanged it for a gold watch! It sounds rather laid back but, at the time, I was terribly upset. 800 was

a good Squadron and everyone went out of their way to help me. We slung hammocks on a small deck open to the elements at the side and I was shown how to fit stretchers on the hammock to make it more comfortable. The Mess Deck was below decks as were the aircraft, which were, with wings folded, housed in a hangar at the fore end of the ship. The wings were folded before they were taken below which was achieved by means of a huge lift. Taking off and Landing was a bit "hairy". On take off, the aircraft was positioned at the rear of the flight deck, the wheels were chocked and the fitter and rigger lay on the deck holding a rope attached to each chock. On the signal "chocks away", the engine would rev up and the chocks would be pulled away while the groundcrew lay flat on the deck until the tail of the aircraft had safely passed. Each aircraft had a large hook and, on landing, the pilot released this and it caught on the landing wires across the deck. If the hook missed, the pilot would open the throttle and go round again. To make all this possible, the ship would turn into wind. One of the funnier landings I saw was an Avro 504N. It was so slow that it did not need a hook and in fact had difficulty catching up with the ship. He just made it and on landing came to an immediate stop. The front doors of the hangar could be opened, the theory being that aircraft could take off from within the hangar. It was tried but wasn't very successful. The heads (toilets) on board were rather peculiar. In effect you sat in a small cubicle which covered you from the lower chest. Anyone with VD had to use special cubicles painted red. Bathing was also embarrassing. The baths were round metal containers about ten inches high and three feet in diameter. This you filled with hot water and sat, stood and washed with everyone looking on. Not a pretty sight.

The Navy had a long tradition which went right back to the time of Nelson. Captain's Rounds was one example. Whatever you were doing, you had to stop and stand to attention. One day I was bleeding a hydraulic system on an aircraft when the call for "Captain's Rounds" went out. All my hard work went for a burton as I watched all the oil pouring out of a brake pipe which I wasn't allowed to connect. It was much more important to stand to attention! "Fubsy", our Flight Sergeant played pop with me for arguing. Incidentally, "Fubsy" means short, fat and squat and does appear in the dictionary. Another thing which struck us as funny was when anchoring. The stern was tied to a buoy with a steel hawser, which was pulled in with a grass, a thick rope. In all ports other than Portsmouth, the RAF chaps were expected to help pull this to strange

cries of heave-ho, avast etc., which we always pretended not to understand. At Portsmouth, the Navy personnel had to do this all on their own. This they did with some difficulty since the ship was undermanned. Airmen also had to paint ship in the hangar.

This was the subject of much discontent and was only stopped when an Air Vice Marshal came on board and talked to us, asking what our trades were and where we had trained. The word Halton came to the fore and there was no more painting for us. The chaps in our Squadron were a friendly lot and I got on with all of them. I was particularly friendly with two; one was a good gymnast and the other a Scot who played a good game of tennis. Whenever we had the opportunity on shore at Upavon, we played. Upavon had an indoor court which proved to be very useful; it also had the best run NAAFI canteen that I ever came across. Getting back to the Scot, he was married and came from Cupar in Fife. He was the sort who, when a bit squiffy, used to cry in his beer saying that he had let his wife down. To my knowledge he did not have a drink problem, but what he did have was a problem at sea when even a slightly uneven sea made him seasick. As a result, whilst we were at sea, I serviced two aeroplanes, mine and his. One day we played tennis on deck and he missed the ball which went straight onto the Quarter Deck. We scarpered back to our deck but we were found and taken in front of the Officer of the Watch whom the ball had hit. As it happened, he was a decent sort of chap and quietly told us off in a friendly fashion explaining that a tennis ball was a bit different to the bar of soap which had hit him the week before. Apparently the matelots had been playing deck hockey using a bar of soap as a ball. Speaking of hockey, I played for the Fleet Air Arm team which was quite a good team. Oddly enough, I was the only airman who played for the Courageous team



Courageous entering the harbour in Malta.

and I scored a few goals for them. I don't know why no-one else was picked. We played mostly in Malta. The chap who was the gymnast had an uncle who was the captain in charge of the tug boats used at Valetta. We could go ashore and stay with his family. His daughter had a great capacity for playing shove halfpenny. At the

Naval Club in Valetta, we played Tombola but never won. Winners could get as much as £80 and were given an escort back to the ship as that amount was an awful lot of money in those days. On board, for recreation, I learned to play bridge and chess. One of the RAF Sergeants was a Chess Master who used to play eight of us at the same time; no-one ever beat him.

On occasion, four of us were allowed to borrow a sailing dinghy. The first time I crewed was off the Orkney Islands. The Courageous was anchored offshore so we made it to the beach, pulled the boat onto the beach and went about a ¼ mile inland where there was a farm which would give us tea. The only money we had was 3/10½d and a 1½d stamp. We told the farmer's wife this and she said that was alright. We each had two boiled eggs, as much bread and butter as we could eat and as many bannocks as we wanted. The next time we took the dinghy out was in Gibraltar Bay. We had a lovely sail half way to the nearest point in Spain, had a swim, got back in the boat and set sail. Then disaster, the wind dropped to zero! Nothing else for it, the two biggest and strongest had to row it back. By this time, the Officer of the Watch was getting a bit worried and called out part of one of the watches. The Captain's motor boat was also lowered just in case, however the rowers did very well and got us back. The crew of the Courageous however, made us climb up a Jacob's ladder to get back on board. In doing so I lost my cap. Of course the watch which had been called out hooted and catcalled and the motor boat crew did a complete circle before we started the climb and the wave it made swamped us and the boat. We weren't very popular with the crew as they were supposed to be resting. Somehow my cap was returned. At Scapa Flow, the four of us were invited to crew a larger boat, captained by a Lieutenant RN, in an official race. We got to the starting line when guess what, the wind dropped and we all had to operate an oar and row back. It was all good fun however. Whilst we were around the Orkneys, the Fleet Air Arm hockey team was invited to play a girl's school. At 10-0 we gave them our goalkeeper! The girls took it all in good part and we were given a lovely tea. During my time on board, I got regular mail including letters from Perle who also sent me a huge parcel of fruit which she got from Marks and Spencer. A time or two, Courageous did a speed trial. It was quite an experience watching the wake at more than 30 knots. I believe that, at one time, She held the record for a trip from Portsmouth to Gibraltar - less than 24 hours. Occasionally an aircraft would run into trouble, ie missing the wires on landing and, either swerving into the funnel or diving over the side. One of our Nimrods went missing but the pilot was picked up. I've always remembered that because, the day before, the rigger, for some



800 Squadron Osprey

We had a pleasant time there and during that time, I was able to get some flights in my Osprey. One weekend, the Flight Commander took me to Northolt for the weekend which meant that I could see Perle.

I think that, by then, my parents had moved to Chatham. They lived in Married Quarters for a while then rented a house in Gillingham, 41 Carlton Avenue. It was here that I bought their first radio, a Murphy. During my last cruise, I volunteered to be a Sergeant Pilot. I was given a complete aircrew medical but, having passed on everything else, I failed the eyesight test. The Naval doctor was very good; he patted me on the shoulder and said "Hard Luck, Good Try". Although I hadn't done a full commission, I was released and on 20 August 1935 was posted to the Air Navigation School at Andover. It was almost the point at which Perle and I would separate. She had moved from Hounslow to Southall where she lived in a bedsit. My story at Andover starts in connection with her.



**41 Carlton Avenue
Photographed in 1988**



Members of 800 Squadron - RAF Upavon 1935