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**Imperialism and Identity in British Colonial Naval Culture,  
1930s to Decolonisation**

Daniel Owen Spence

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of  
Sheffield Hallam University  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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## Abstract

During the Second World War, around 8,000 men from fifteen colonial territories fought for the British Empire in locally-raised naval volunteer forces. Their relatively small size has meant that up to now they have remained merely a footnote within the wider historiography of the war. Yet, if examined beyond their ambiguous wartime contribution and placed within the broader context of imperial history, they provide an important new lens for analysing the dynamics of imperialism during the twilight of the British Empire. Through a comparative analysis of three case studies - the Caribbean, Southeast Asia and East Asia - and by reconciling the 'official' record in the 'metropole' with 'subaltern' sources located in those regions, this thesis examines for the first time the political, social and cultural impact of these forces. It explores how they emerged out of a climate of 'imperial overstretch' as bulwarks for the preservation of British 'prestige'; how imperial ideology and racial discourses of power influenced naval recruitment, strategy and management, affecting colonial conceptions of identity, indigenous belief systems and ethnic relations; and how naval service, during both war and peacetime, influenced motivations, imperial sentiment, group cohesion and force discipline.

This thesis will also assess the evolution of these part-time colonial volunteer forces into professional sovereign navies within the context of decolonisation. It will investigate the extent to which British hegemonic influence was maintained within post-colonial relationships. Issues of nationalisation, its utilisation as a tool for 'nation-building', and the impact of nationalist ideology and social engineering upon service efficiency and esprit de corps will also be examined. In the process this thesis furthers developments within the 'new naval history', by reconceptualising our understanding of navies as not merely organisations for the physical projection and maintenance of political and economic influence, but as human and cultural institutions, in which power was expressed as much in the ideas and relations they cultivated, as the barrels of their guns.

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## List of Abbreviations

<b>A/S</b>	Anti-Submarine
<b>AB</b>	Able Bodied
<b>C-in-C</b>	Commander-in-Chief/Commodore-in-Charge
<b>CCP</b>	Communist Party of China
<b>CID</b>	Committee of Imperial Defence
<b>CINA</b>	Cayman Islands National Archives
<b>CO</b>	Commanding Officer
<b>CRNVR</b>	Ceylon Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve
<b>GOC</b>	General Officer Commanding
<b>HKAAF</b>	Hong Kong Auxiliary Air Force
<b>HKNVF</b>	Hong Kong Naval Volunteer Force
<b>HKPRO</b>	Hong Kong Public Records Office
<b>HKRNR</b>	Hong Kong Royal Naval Reserve
<b>HKRNVR</b>	Hong Kong Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve
<b>HKVDC</b>	Hong Kong Volunteer Defence Corps - 'The Volunteers'
<b>HMS</b>	His/Her Majesty's Ship(s)
<b>HQ</b>	Headquarters
<b>KD</b>	Kapal di-Raja (His Majesty's Ship)
<b>KMT</b>	Kuomintang (Nationalist Party of China)
<b>LEP</b>	Locally Enlisted Personnel
<b>MFV</b>	Motor Fishing Vessel
<b>ML</b>	Motor Launch
<b>MNF</b>	Malayan Naval Force

<b>MRNVR</b>	Malayan Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve
<b>MTB</b>	Motor Torpedo Boat
<b>OPV</b>	Offshore Patrol Vessel
<b>PRC</b>	People's Republic of China
<b>NEP</b>	New Economic Policy
<b>OHC</b>	Oral History Centre
<b>OIC</b>	Officer-in-charge
<b>PO</b>	Petty Officer
<b>RHKDF</b>	Royal Hong Kong Defence Force
<b>RN</b>	Royal Navy
<b>RMN</b>	Royal Malayan Navy
<b>RNR</b>	Royal Naval Reserve
<b>RNVR</b>	Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve
<b>RWIN</b>	Royal West Indian Navy
<b>SSRNVR</b>	Straits Settlements Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve
<b>TLDM</b>	Tentera Laut Diraja Malaysia (Royal Malaysian Navy)
<b>TNA</b>	The National Archives
<b>TNVF</b>	Trinidad Naval Volunteer Force
<b>TRNVR</b>	Trinidad Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve
<b>UMNO</b>	United Malays National Organisation
<b>WO</b>	Warrant Officer

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## General Introduction

During the Second World War, around 8,000 men from fifteen colonial territories fought for the British Empire in locally-raised naval volunteer forces. These were founded in Trinidad, Gambia, Sierra Leone, the Gold Coast, Nigeria, Kenya, Tanganyika, Zanzibar, Mauritius, Ceylon, Burma, Malaya, the Straits Settlements, Hong Kong and Fiji, all between the years of 1933 and 1941<sup>1</sup>. Their relatively small size has meant that up to now they have remained merely a footnote within the wider historiography of the war. Yet, if examined beyond their ambiguous wartime contribution and placed within the broader context of imperial history, they provide an important new lens for analysing the dynamics of imperialism during the twilight of the British Empire. It is illuminating that these forces were formed within less than a decade of each other, presenting a significant shift in naval policy towards the recruitment of colonial manpower at a time of distinct internal and external pressures on British imperial power. Important questions are raised as to the degree in which this marks a cultural change in British attitudes towards non-white colonial subjects and their suitability for naval service, or whether practical concerns of imperial defence predominated. This in turn prompts a reconsideration of 'imperial overstretch' as a genuine concern for contemporary imperial and naval officials and how they reacted to offset such pressures.

Through a comparative analysis of three case studies - the Caribbean, Southeast Asia and East Asia - and by reconciling the 'official' record in the

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<sup>1</sup> Not included are the Dominions or India, as they were self-governing, and had professional navies on which a sizeable literature already exists.

'metropole' with 'subaltern' sources located in those regions, this thesis examines for the first time the political, social and cultural impact of these colonial naval forces. It explores how they emerged out of a climate of 'imperial overstretch' as bulwarks for the preservation of British 'prestige'; how imperial ideology and racial discourses of power influenced naval recruitment, strategy and management, affecting colonial conceptions of identity, indigenous belief systems and ethnic relations; and how naval service, during both war and peacetime, influenced motivations, imperial sentiment, group cohesion and force discipline. This thesis will also assess the evolution of these part-time colonial volunteer forces into professional sovereign navies within the context of decolonisation. It will investigate the extent to which British hegemonic influence was maintained within post-colonial relationships. Issues of nationalisation, its utilisation as a tool for 'nation-building', and the impact of nationalist ideology and social engineering upon service efficiency and esprit de corps will also be examined.

It is commonly recognised that both military and naval history have been relatively late in engaging with the 'cultural turn' in historical scholarship, partly on account of their professional associations and the number of non-academically trained former armed forces personnel who have gone on to write service histories. Military and naval history has thus traditionally adopted a 'top-down' approach, focused on strategy and technological issues, and emphasising the forces' importance in national diplomacy, high politics and economics. Writing as late as 2003, Quintin Colville has concluded that 'the overriding concern of most of the existing academic literature on the Royal Navy (RN) in the twentieth century, has been to assess the organisation's performance of its stated duties: the protection of

British interests and sovereignty in peace and war.<sup>2</sup> While naval historians may have exhibited a reluctance to engage with cultural history methodology and themes, cultural historians are equally culpable in not applying their conceptual frameworks to maritime contexts, perhaps partly due the innate prejudice that prevails in some quarters towards naval and military history as an academic discipline. Even in the early years of the twenty-first century, it has been observed by Max Jones that 'practitioners of the "new cultural history" have devoted surprisingly little attention to maritime life after 1850'. In fact, in surveying over 650 books and articles published under the subject of 'Naval Forces' in the 'Royal Historical Society Bibliography of British and Irish History' between January 2003 and October 2007, he found that fewer than 20 texts could be described as deploying cultural historical methodology<sup>3</sup>. A belated cultural shift within military history has been aided by interest in the cultural dimensions of British imperial rule, inspired in part by Edward Said's *Orientalism*. Colonial conflicts that have subsequently been studied, however, such as the 1857 Indian Mutiny/Rebellion and the Second South African War of 1899-1902, were ones in which the Navy played merely a supporting role<sup>4</sup>. In more recent years, culturally-informed naval historians have finally begun to reconcile this historiographical oversight, with Jan Rûger's *The Great Naval Game: Britain and Germany in the Age of Empire* (Cambridge, 2007) proving particularly influential within this renaissance<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Quintin Colville, 'Jack Tar and the Gentleman Officer: The Role of Uniform in Shaping the Class - and Gender-Related Identities of British Naval Personnel, 1930-1939', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6<sup>th</sup> series, Vol. 13 (2003), pp.105-29, p.105.

<sup>3</sup> Max Jones, 'The Surest Safeguard of Peace': Technology, the Navy and the Nation in Boys' Papers, c. 1905-1907', in Andrew Lambert, Jan Rûger, Robert J. Blyth (eds.), *The Dreadnought and the Edwardian Age* (Surrey, 2011), p.109.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p.110.

<sup>5</sup> Other notable recent studies include Colville, 'Jack Tar'; Lucy Delap, "'Thus Does Man Prove His Fitness to Be the Master of Things": Shipwrecks, Chivalry and Masculinities in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Britain', *Cultural and Social History*, 3/1 (2006): 45-74; Jeffrey D. Glasco, "'The Seaman Feels Him-self a Man'", *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 66 (2004): 40-56; Ken Lunn and Ann Day, 'Britain as Island: National Identity and the Sea', in Helen Brocklehurst and

The vast majority of these studies, however, have thus far been overwhelmingly Anglo-British-centric in their focus. This has also been demonstrated by certain trends within Second World War historiography. At the start of the twentieth century, Britain's maritime dominance was far from assured, compounded by relative industrial decline and geopolitical rivalries which threatened the Empire's collective security. One perceived solution was to draw closer to the Empire, and to encourage the colonies to take on increased responsibility for their own naval defence. The 'white' Dominions were the first to establish full-time navies of their own after the 1909 Imperial Conference, followed by the formation of the Royal Indian Navy in 1934. The significant contribution of these forces to the Second World War has been historiographically acknowledged, partly on account of their size, but also due to a traditionally western-centric representation of that conflict, with the more 'martial' Indians presented as an exception alongside the victorious white Anglo-Saxons.

Over the last thirty years, postcolonial and subaltern studies have sought to readdress this coloured distortion, with notable work being conducted on the contribution of African army regiments to that conflict, particularly by David Killingray<sup>6</sup> and Timothy Parsons<sup>7</sup>. A key point of historiographical debate here has been the impact of wartime imperial military service on the development of anti-colonial nationalist politics. Israel<sup>8</sup>, Grundlingh<sup>9</sup> and Parsons<sup>10</sup> have argued that ex-

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Robert Phillips (eds.), *History, Nationhood and the Question of Britain* (Basingstoke, 2004), pp.124-36; N.A.M. Roger, 'Queen Elizabeth and the Myth of Sea-Power in English history', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6<sup>th</sup> series, Vol. 14 (2004): 153-74.

<sup>6</sup> David Killingray, *Fighting for Britain: African Soldiers in the Second World War* (Woodbridge, 2010).

<sup>7</sup> Timothy Parsons, *The African Rank-and-File: Social Implications of Colonial Military Service in the King's African Rifles, 1902-1964* (Oxford, 1999)

<sup>8</sup> Adrienne M. Israel, 'Ex-Servicemen at the Crossroads: Protest and Politics in Post-War Ghana', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 30, 1992, pp.359-368.

<sup>9</sup> Louis Grundlingh, 'Soldiers and Politics: A Study of Political Consciousness of Black South African Soldiers After the Second World War', *Historia*, Vol. 36, Issue 2, November 1991, pp.55-66.



servicemen were a significant influence in African colonial independence movements, while Killingray<sup>11</sup>, Schleh<sup>12</sup>, Olusanya<sup>13</sup>, and Headrick<sup>14</sup> have contested their relative importance. Christopher Bayly and Tim Harper have broadened the geographical scope to encompass British colonial armies in Asia<sup>15</sup>, but still with a predominant military rather than naval focus. Though the operational presence of colonial naval forces beyond the Dominions and India has been acknowledged by Ashley Jackson<sup>16</sup>, their wider social and cultural impact in the Second 'World' War and on British imperialism continues to be largely overlooked by academics. While some commemorative histories of contemporary independent navies examine their colonial roots, they are inevitably produced with a self-celebratory agenda, bearing jingoistic titles like *Honour and Sacrifice*<sup>17</sup> and *Serving the Nation*<sup>18</sup>, and serve as nationalist propaganda for post-colonial nation-building, such as in trying to foster national unity in an unequal multiethnic society:

I want the Malaysian Navy to be an example to the nation and to the whole world where unity is concerned. As Malaysia constitutes races of different religions and nationalities that have always lived in peace and harmony, we should extend this harmonic state of affairs more effectively whilst serving in the Malaysian Navy... I want, last but not least, a Malaysian

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<sup>10</sup> Timothy Parsons, *The African Rank-and-File: Social Implications of Colonial Military Service in the King's African Rifles, 1902–1964* (Portsmouth NH, 1999)

<sup>11</sup> David Killingray, 'Soldiers, Ex-Servicemen, and Politics in the Gold Coast, 1939-50'. *Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 21, 1983, pp.523-34

<sup>12</sup> Eugene Schleh, 'The Post-War Careers of Ex-Servicemen in Ghana and Uganda', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 6, Issue 2, August 1968, pp.203-20.

<sup>13</sup> G. O. Olusanya, 'The Role of Ex-Servicemen in Nigerian Politics', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 6, Issue 2, August 1968, pp 221-232.

<sup>14</sup> Rita Headrick, 'African soldiers in World War II', *Armed Forces and Society*. Vol. IV. 1978, pp.502-526.

<sup>15</sup> Christopher Bayly and Tim Harper, *Forgotten Armies: The Fall of British Asia, 1941-1945* (Cambridge, 2005) and *Forgotten Wars: The End of Britain's Asian Empire* (London, 2007).

<sup>16</sup> Ashley Jackson, *The British Empire and the Second World War* (London, 2006).

<sup>17</sup> Royal Malaysian Navy (ed.), *Honour and Sacrifice* (Kuala Lumpur, 1994).

<sup>18</sup> Royal Malaysian Navy (ed.), *Serving the Nation* (Kuala Lumpur, 2004).

Navy that would consist of officers and men who possess a sense of loyalty and patriotism.<sup>19</sup>

Such books lack academic rigour, as generally do naval histories written for popular audiences often by amateur historians and former servicemen<sup>20</sup>, meaning these forces are not analysed within a broader historical, theoretical or comparative geographical context to explain their wider significance.

In 1999, Barry M. Gough commented within the *Oxford History of the British Empire* (Volume V), that 'far from being an old-fashioned field of inquiry, naval and Imperial themes are rich in possibilities for studying the interface of societies, systems, and states', yet the 'general linkage of navy to Empire continues to escape historians, perhaps because the task is such a daunting one'. To rectify this, Gough suggested an area in need of further research was 'a study of how the Royal Navy influenced the course of the early history of colonial and Commonwealth navies'.<sup>21</sup> This is one of the main themes this thesis will address. In extending recent cultural explorations of naval history, the thesis will also add a more global dimension to naval historiography's current predominantly Anglo-British-European focus, incorporating interactions within the Caribbean, East and Southeast Asia.

An examination of discourses of race and ethnicity is crucial in analysing the British-colonial relations that underpinned these naval forces. Within the military context, martial race theory heavily influenced the recruitment and organisation of colonial armies from the nineteenth into the twentieth century. Despite drawing criticism from postcolonial circles for what they see as perpetuating Western

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<sup>19</sup> Chief Petty Officer Radiman, quoted in *ibid.*, p.8.

<sup>20</sup> Commodore P.J. Melson CBE Royal Navy, *White Ensign - Red Dragon: the History of the Royal Navy in Hong Kong 1841-1997*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Hong Kong, 1997)

<sup>21</sup> Barry M. Gough, 'The Royal Navy and the British Empire', in Robin W. Winks, *The Oxford History of the British Empire: Volume V Historiography* (Oxford, 1999), p.340.

constructions of the Oriental 'other', there has been a resurgence in contemporary interest in the concept, partly inspired by the war in Afghanistan and 'human terrain mapping', which places pronounced importance on understanding the social and cultural battlefield as well as the physical one. Yet, regardless of its American-centric rebranding, the relationship between the social sciences and the military stretches back to the nineteenth century, at least from a British perspective, and it was this marriage that gave voice to the martial race theorists. Critical historical studies of this ideology have predominantly emerged only within the last fifteen years, and typical of a relatively young field of enquiry, it is rife with debate. The prevalence of martial race discourse in India during the post-1857 period, when 'martial' became a synonym for those groups who remained 'loyal' during the mutiny, similarly extended elsewhere in the British Empire, has fuelled the argument put forward by David Killingray, 'that certain peoples or societies had a special capacity for military service - was largely a colonial construct'<sup>22</sup>. Yet, as Douglas Peers has shown, such depictions began to emerge from the 1830s onwards, before the mutiny occurred<sup>23</sup>. The view that martial races were merely a 'colonial construct', also presents the impression that an omnipresent 'official mind' was at work, directing complicit colonial officials and military recruiters in implementing this ideology as part of a concerted 'imperial project'. Yet, the officers themselves, such as George MacMunn who wrote the longstanding *The Martial Races of India* (1933) following lengthy service in the Indian Army, were 'invested in the truth of the martial race ideology'<sup>24</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup> David Killingray, 'Guardians of Empire', in David Killingray and David Omissi (eds.), *Guardians of Empire* (Manchester, 1999), p.15.

<sup>23</sup> Douglas M. Peers, 'Those Noble Exemplars of the True Military Tradition'; Constructions of the Indian Army in the Mid-Victorian Press', *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol.31, No.1 (1997), pp.109-142.

<sup>24</sup>

For MacMunn, it was not a colonial construction for dividing and ruling the 'natives', but an observational certainty.

Rather than simply being an imperial imagining, which itself ascribes a passive role to the colonised, imperial observations, though manipulated and distorted, nevertheless were based on some element of empirical reality. 'Martial races' did not suddenly appear overnight just because the British decided to attach a label to them. In many instances, the people documented in anthropological studies and colonial military reports were conscious of their own martiality, having either been personally involved in combat or had their group identity reinforced by the celebration of ancestors' armed exploits, wearing it as a badge of pride and honour. They still do in some instances; in an interview with Jaswant Singh Gill, the first Punjabi Sikh to join the Malayan Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve (MRNVR) in 1949, early on he identified himself by reciting his military heritage:

My grandfather was the AVC [Army Veterinary Corps] to King George V, my father fought in the First World War, my uncles fought in the Second World War... as a community, we are a martial race... it comes naturally to us... the motivation is there. Our community says you are a martial race, you are a soldier, you fight... The British never said 'you are a martial race' and therefore you become a martial race, no, We were already a martial race, the only thing the British realised was that we were a martial race. Soldiering comes to us naturally.<sup>25</sup>

Such an account would come under criticism from those who argue that it merely represents the internalisation of colonial discourse, that 'reputations, inflated or not,

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<sup>25</sup> Interview conducted by author with Jaswant Singh Gill, 10 July 2009, Singapore.

often have an effect on the self-image of the regiments and the soldiers concerned', thus producing 'a circular, self-replicating effect' in which 'it may even be argued that the supposed martial races became more warlike precisely because it was expected of them.'<sup>26</sup> Heather Streets has confronted why martial race theory has been so intangible for historians to define, concluding that: 'the power of martial race ideology stemmed from its very flexibility and ambiguity: it was adaptable to a variety of historical and geographical situations and functioned alternatively to inspire, intimidate, exclude, and include.'<sup>27</sup> It was neither entirely a colonial construct, nor an objective reality, but a mutually-influencing combination of the two, creating a 'chicken or egg'-like scenario. This thesis will argue that it represented a form of imperial 'collaboration', to draw on Ronald Robinson's theory<sup>28</sup>, it being mutually beneficial for both the colonisers and the colonised to cultivate that identity.

Yet, what, if any, was its impact upon colonial naval forces formed during the 1930s? Though there were parallels in the stereotypes depicted and the discourse used by the ruling elite, there were distinct differences in regards to their naval application. Races seen as inherently 'martial' would not necessarily possess the same set of characteristics and skills required to make them ideal naval recruits. What naval recruiters were looking for instead were 'seafaring races', coastal peoples with nautical traditions in maritime trade and fishing, for example, but most importantly, possessing the 'call of the sea' that the British saw in themselves as an island race and naval power, though theirs was naturally believed to be of a superior

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<sup>26</sup> John M. MacKenzie, in Heather Streets, *Martial races: The military, race and masculinity in British imperial culture, 1857-1914* (Manchester, 2004), pp.viii-ix.

<sup>27</sup> Heather Streets, *Martial races: The military, race and masculinity in British imperial culture, 1857-1914* (Manchester, 2004), p.4.

<sup>28</sup> Ronald Robinson, 'Non-European foundations of European imperialism: sketch for a theory of collaboration', in E.R.J. Owen and R.B. Sutcliffe (eds.), *Studies in the Theory of Imperialism* (London, 1972), chap.5.

paternalistic kind. The men recruited into colonial naval forces thus underwrote British hegemony and contemporary 'development' discourse which had evolved from earlier ideas of the 'civilising mission'. Beneath this guise a 'divide and rule' policy was pursued, with certain ethnic groups within the colonies excluded from naval service because of their perceived 'racial' unsuitability, though this too masked concerns over their imperial loyalty. Colonial naval forces were thus also dependent on the collaboration of such groups, not only for their operation, but for the maintenance of British 'prestige'. The ideological development of this theory of 'seagoing races', the influence of such discourse on colonial identities, and the practical and political implications of this for both the Navy and British imperialism will form a central line of analysis in this thesis.

To attempt to study all fifteen colonies that raised naval volunteer forces, providing sufficient background information to interpret the different cultural and political contexts, and to cover the timeframe from their formation in the 1930s, through the Second World War to decolonisation, taking in additional flashpoints, would clearly be unfeasible within the limits of a thesis. Attention will therefore be focused on three regional case studies: the Caribbean, Southeast Asia and East Asia. These have been selected on the basis that they constituted the extremities of Empire, were the most active colonial naval theatres against the two major belligerents in the Second World War, and as a result their forces were also amongst the largest. On a practical level, they also provide the most fertile opportunities for primary research, being localities with sizeable collections of well-catalogued, accessible original documents, along with pre-recorded oral histories. These will be considered in relation to Admiralty and Colonial Office records located in the United

Kingdom, in order to provide a more transnational and holistic mode of analysis than that traditionally performed by exclusively imperial/metropole/top-down or local/peripheral/subaltern approaches. This thesis thus aims to bridge the gap between official imperial policy and individual colonial experiences, metropolitan perspectives and local viewpoints.

Methodological considerations are raised notably by the use of oral testimony and the recording of original interviews. Unlike the social sciences, oral history 'interviewees are selected, not because they present some abstract statistical norm, but because they typify historical processes. The real issues are historiographical, not statistical'<sup>29</sup>. Therefore the need for a large representative sample of participants is not as relevant here, crucially as the number of potential interviewees for the war period dwindles as time takes its inevitable toll on that generation. Testimonies are intended to provide personal insight, atmosphere and texture into the culture of the service rather than to provide evidence for scientific theory or to illustrate patterns. The sample is thus seen as indicative rather than representative. Interviewees were identified through existing oral history projects, such as the Oral History Centre in the Singapore National Archives, and professional ex-services organisations such as the Commonwealth Ex-Services League, the World Veterans Federation, and the Cayman Islands Veterans Association.

One of the main issues for historians concerning oral history is the extent to which oral evidence can be deemed as 'reliable'? To answer this, one must first consider the reliability of documentary evidence, naturally being the yardstick by which oral history is measured. Whereas archival documents' traditional reliability

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<sup>29</sup> Ronald J. Grele, 'Movement without aim: Methodological and theoretical problems in oral history', in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds.), *The Oral History Reader* (London, 1998), p. 41.

has rested on the notion of their unchanging nature, this in itself is not entirely true, as sometimes the same document can appear in different collections, but with amendments. Collections can be incomplete, and do not always hold previous correspondence or accurately convey the original context in which an item may have been written. For example, a collection may be compiled around a particular theme, such as to commemorate an important event, but this raises problems in itself, in that it reflects what the archivist or curator considers 'important', not necessarily what the author had originally intended. Can an archivist or curator legitimately reflect the attitudes of other groups represented in a source to which he/she is not a member?

Such records can therefore be distorting, framed by subsequent events and discourse. The original author of a document can often be commenting or reflecting on events from afar, for example within imperial history, on the periphery from the metropole, through second-hand information collected on the ground passed up through subordinates and sent over thousands of miles, or even looking back upon events that occurred several months earlier, such as for the purposes of an annual report. This distance can also constitute cultural distance, where those written about represent a different social/ethnic group to that of the author, who do not possess or have been deprived of the means or opportunities by which to represent themselves in the historical record. Such sources can thus represent a skewed and often Occidentally-orientated depiction of 'subaltern' groups, though this in itself can reveal fascinating insights into the perceptions and prejudices of the author, particularly useful for the study of identity within this thesis. Consequently, those flaws which have been levelled at oral history can also be aimed at 'traditional' historical sources, and consequently 'all sources need to be tested against other evidence'<sup>30</sup>.

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<sup>30</sup> Donald A. Ritchie, *Doing Oral History* (Oxford, 2003), p.26.



One of the biggest concerns surrounding oral history is the role that memory plays. Often interviews will be conducted many years after the events in question. In such circumstances it would be difficult for the interviewee to recall precise details such as dates and names, and this highlights the need for the interviewer to have carried out archival research beforehand so as to be able to place the testimony within its proper context and test any conflicting information. Photographs, journals, letters and CVs can serve as useful prompts for memory. The selective nature of memory can also be shaped by subsequent events, so as to retrospectively elevate the importance of an original action. Similarly, a person's perceptions of self and 'others' can also alter over time to reflect contemporary social issues and thus may not be reflective of how that person originally felt and how their views influenced their actions. Yet, rather than discrediting such testimony altogether, these factors themselves can provide important cultural insights into shifting societal attitudes. History can be utilised as a tool by which a post-colonial independent country can formulate a 'national' identity for nation-building and power-conciliatory purposes. In doing so, a nationalist mythology can emerge around particular historical moments, retrospectively elevated in significance so as to support the national project and underline the ruling party's legitimacy. The extent to which public memory invades personal memory and how that influences constructions of identity, particularly within plural societies, can provide fascinating insights into the effectiveness of such discourses and how the nation views itself. This, however, again highlights the importance of drawing on several reference points from which to formulate conclusions for this thesis.

Of course, a researcher will go into an interview with preconceived ideas based upon background reading from both the historiography and the archives, and a set of questions and issues they wish to address. It is important, however, to allow the interviewee to work through their personal narrative first, and not rush them into responding to very specific and potentially sensitive questions, possibly out of context to what *they* consider to be important. This is a key part of the rapport-building process and establishing a mutual trust which will put the interviewee at ease and feel more comfortable to talk about any sensitive issues later. Considering this, the interviews for this research began by asking an open-ended question to provide a starting-point for the interviewee and establish context, for example, 'please could you tell me a bit about your background growing up, where you came from, etc.?' The interviewee took this opportunity to then work through their personal narrative, offering an overview of their life and career, which helped provide the first indication of key moments particularly important to them. This process also provided hooks to return to afterwards to ask more specific questions that led onto the main themes of the thesis. It was important, however, not to ask leading questions, or try to manoeuvre the interviewee into a position where they were asked to verify an argument or agenda created by the interviewer. Not only is this ethically unsound practice, but it would also produce misleading testimony based on statements not conceived by the interviewee themselves. The interviewer, however, also needed to be alert throughout to the question of whether the interviewee was qualified to talk on a particular subject; were they in a position to experience events firsthand or are they simply passing along second-hand information?<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> *ibid.*, p.34.

The key research questions of the thesis can be grouped into three predominant themes, explored through the three regional case studies. They comprise 1) The formation of the naval forces: What influence did 'imperial overstretch' play in the creation of colonial naval forces during the 1930s? Were local or imperial factors predominant in their foundation and development? How did imperial and racial ideology influence naval planners and recruitment? What were the motivations for colonial naval volunteers? 2) The operation of the forces: What were the envisaged roles of colonial naval forces and how effectively did they fulfil them? How did the forces reinforce British imperial 'prestige'? How was colonial manpower managed and with what consequences for discipline? What influence did war and naval service have on colonial conceptions of racial/ethnic identity? 3) The cultural, political and social impact of the naval forces on the colonies: What impact did colonial naval service have on indigenous belief systems and ethnic/racial relations? How did the forces adapt to the changing post-war context of the Cold War and decolonisation? What issues were raised by the transfer of power and moves to naval autonomy and nationalisation? What imperial legacy/influence was left within post-colonial navies?

The first case study will focus on the Caribbean, which hosted the only colonial naval unit in the Western hemisphere. Though this was based in Trinidad, it included volunteers from almost all of Britain's West Indian colonies, and thus was the most cosmopolitan of all the colonial naval forces raised. Consequently, it provides a unique case for examining the interaction of different ethnicities within such an imperial structure. How did motivations vary for different sets of volunteers? What influence did imperial racial ideology have on the recruitment and the treatment of different ethnic groups and their identities? How did volunteers react to this and

the pressures of wartime naval service? Simultaneously, Britain's imperial position in the region was facing the dual pressures of colonial nationalism and rising American hegemony, a process accelerated by the Second World War. Therefore, what role did the force have on British imperial 'prestige', particularly following the American influx to the islands after 1940? These questions will be explored by comparing the contrasting experiences of Trinidadians and Cayman Islanders.

Case study two examines Southeast Asia, another ethnically plural region, but one which was not reflected in the naval forces' composition, where initially only Malay volunteers were incorporated. It also provides the key example of a colonial volunteer force which evolved into a professional independent navy that continues to exist today, highlighting issues of imperial transition and decolonisation in the process. Again, a key question will be how did racial ideology influence the discriminatory recruitment policies adopted? What impact did defeat by the Japanese have on imperial prestige and naval organisation in Malaya? How did 'collaboration' work within a naval context? What was the legacy of British imperialism within naval nationalisation and the 'nation-building' policies of the post-colonial government?

The final case study encompasses East Asia, centred on colonial navalism in Hong Kong, but relating to Chinese culture more broadly and Britain's regional position regarding Japan, and Nationalist and Communist China. It offers a contrasting example to Malaya in that there was no case of imperial transition here, at least not during the traditional era of decolonisation, with Britain looking to reassert colonial control and prestige in Hong Kong during the post-war period. What strategies did the Admiralty adopt to overcome obstructive local elements and encourage naval volunteering? How did Chinese cultural perceptions influence

British concerns regarding the naval suitability and imperial loyalty of local recruits?  
What impact did compulsory service have on naval and colonial cohesion? And what role did the naval force play in upholding British imperial policy and prestige in the region?

## Imperial Overstretch and Colonial Naval Defence

To understand what was particular about the geopolitical climate of the 1930s that resulted in the proliferation of colonial naval forces then, we need to first explain the key issue of 'imperial overstretch', and the roots in the nineteenth century. The popular mythology of *Pax Britannica* aside, the second half of the nineteenth century was already one of uncertainty for the British Empire and its collective security. The Crimean War, followed not long after by the Indian Mutiny had 'illustrated the danger involved in undue dispersion of the armed forces of the Crown, and the necessity for taking steps whereby the overseas people of the Empire would provide, at least in part, for their own security'. The Volunteer movement, which emerged in Britain in response to the threat of French invasion, offered a potential solution and 'gave a stimulus and an example to the Colonies in the direction of self-defence'<sup>32</sup>. The nautical nature of the British Empire meant that imperial defence was invariably seaward in its orientation, and the first Colonial Naval Defence Act was passed in 1865 to allow the white settler colonies to raise a body of volunteers to provide local naval defence. New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland, South Australia, Tasmania and New Zealand took up this option to form small auxiliary naval units over the next few decades, though the legislation restricted them to territorial waters<sup>33</sup>.

As British imperialism expanded during the nineteenth century and technology advanced, costs for the Royal Navy's upkeep inevitably also rose, placing an

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<sup>32</sup> Sir Charles Lucas (ed.), *The Empire At War*, Vol.I (Oxford, 1921), p.77.

<sup>33</sup> Bob Nicholls, 'Colonial naval forces before Federation', in David Stevens and John Reeve (eds.), *Southern Trident: Strategy, History and the Rise of Australian Naval Power* (Crows Nest, 2001), pp.125-39.

increasing burden firmly on the shoulders of the British taxpayer. The colonial Empire, which derived defensive and economic benefits from a strong navy, contributed nothing. This drain on the British finance and manpower led the Liberal statesman Charles Dilke in 1872 to argue that 'the colonies are a source of military weakness to us, and our 'protection' of them is a source of danger to the colonists'. His argument for economic pragmatism was balanced by a paternalistic concern for colonial growth, rhetoric that would be resurrected by 1930s colonial navalists:

As for our so-called defence of the colonies, in war-time we defend ourselves: we defend the colonies only during peace. In war-time they are ever left to shift for themselves, and they would undoubtedly be better to do so were they in the habit of maintaining their military establishments in times of peace. The present system weakens us and them - us, by taxes and by the withdrawal of our men and ships; the colonies, by preventing the development of that self-reliance which is requisite to form a nation's greatness.<sup>34</sup>

The Russian war scare of 1878 prompted the creation a Royal Commission, chaired by Lord Carnarvon, 'to enquire into the defence of British possessions and commerce abroad', and which came to the conclusion that 'the time, in our opinion, has arrived when the Colonies may reasonably be expected to take upon themselves some share of that defence - a burden hitherto exclusively borne by the mother-country.'<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Charles Dilke, *Greater Britain*, in Peter Cain (ed.), *Empire and Imperialism: The Debate of the 1870s* (Chippenham, 1999), p.23.

<sup>35</sup> Quoted in Richard Harding, 'Review of Donald M. Shurman, *Imperial Defence 1868-1887*', *Journal for Maritime Research*, Vol.5 (2003).

In response, a colonial conference was convened in 1887 to negotiate the issue, and achieved a combined flat contribution of £122,597 per annum from the Australian colonies and New Zealand towards the maintenance of a naval squadron in their waters. This was but a token gesture, however, appearing to the Colonial Secretary Sir Henry Holland, as 'trifling in comparison' to a British peacetime naval expenditure exceeding £13,000,000<sup>36</sup>. The impending naval arms race with Germany exacerbated this disparity, with Britain struggling to maintain the 'two-power standard', formally adopted as part of the 1889 Naval Defence Act although it built on previous informal policy, whereby the Royal Navy would at least equal her next two largest rivals. With the rapidly-expanding Imperial German Navy concentrated directly across the North Sea, Britain was forced into recalling warships on overseas stations to protect home waters. This was partly off-set by the signing of the 1902 Anglo-Japanese Alliance, which put the defence of Britain's colonies in East Asia and the new Dominion of Australia under the Imperial Japanese Navy's charge, much to Australia's chagrin. More importantly though, this represented the point at which the Royal Navy was no longer able to meet all of its imperial commitments single-handedly. At the Imperial Conference of the same year, Joseph Chamberlain appealed to the rest of the 'white' Empire for help:

We do require your assistance in the administration of the vast empire which is yours as well as ours. The weary Titan staggers under the too vast orb of its fate. We have borne the burden for many years. We think it is time that our children should assist us to support it.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Richard Jebb, *The Imperial Conference*, Vol. 1 (London, 1911), pp.41-2.

<sup>37</sup> Phillips Payson O'Brien, 'The Titan Refreshed: Imperial Overstretch and the British Navy before the First World War', *Past and Present*, No. 172 (August, 2001), pp.146-169, p.146.



The withdrawal of the Royal Navy to European waters both literally and metaphorically brought 'home' the reality that defence of Britain would always be prioritised over the rest of the Empire, something that would be borne out in both World Wars. This was emphasised in 1910 by the Committee of Imperial Defence, which admitted that more remote parts of the Empire, geographically but also distant in regards to strategic and economic importance, might have to be sacrificed so as to ensure British security:

In order to avoid exposing our fleets to the risk of suffering defeat in detail, naval action in remote waters might therefore have to be postponed until by clearing of the situation in home waters adequate naval force could be brought to bear.<sup>38</sup>

The question of 'imperial overstretch' or 'strategic overextension' is a major debate within British imperial history. Chamberlain's 'weary Titan' analogy has led some to argue that Britain faced this problem from at least the turn of the century. Paul Kennedy has posited that as nations ascend they will seek to expand outside of their natural borders, acquiring additional territories, but also increased strategic responsibilities. This continues until the defensive costs to maintain an empire eventually exceeds the economic benefits derived from it, at which point it begins to decline and be eclipsed by other nations who have not yet acquired those same burdens.<sup>39</sup> Kennedy argues that this was the case for Britain in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when she was faced with the problem of having to provide for the defence of the Empire while at the same time experiencing relative

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid, p.155.

<sup>39</sup> Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500-2000* (London, 1988), p.xv-xvi.

economic and industrial decline.<sup>40</sup> Along these lines, Corelli Barnett<sup>41</sup>, Bernard Porter<sup>42</sup>, and Patrick O'Brien<sup>43</sup>, have all argued that the costs of administering and defending the Empire effectively stifled Britain economically prior to 1914, with Lance Davis and Robert Huttenback asserting that 'of all the subsidies enjoyed by the colonies, none was more lucrative than that for defence.'<sup>44</sup> As Table 1 demonstrates, the colonies expended a disproportionately low amount, both in regards to the rest of the Empire and particularly Britain, and in relation to naval as opposed to military defence:

**Table 1. Imperial Defence Expenditure, 1908-1910**

Year	Country	Pop. (m.)	Military expenditure (£m.)	Military expenditure per caput (£)	Naval expenditure (£m.)	Naval expenditure per caput (£)	Total expenditure (£m.)	Total expenditure per caput (£)
1909-10	UK	44.539	27.459	0.62	35.143	0.79	62.602	1.41
	Dominions							
1907-8	Canada	6.154	1.359	0.22	0.099	0.02	1.458	0.24
1907-8	Newfoundland	0.234	0.000	0.00	0.003		0.003	
1907-8	Australia	4.222	1.025	0.24	0.272	0.06	1.297	0.31
1908	New Zealand	1.021	0.193	0.19	0.100	1.10	0.293	0.29
1908	South Africa	5.474	1.258	0.23	0.085	0.02	1.343	0.25
Total	Dominions	61.644	31.295	0.51	35.701	0.58	66.996	1.09
1908-9	India	294.317	20.071	0.07	0.482	0.00	20.553	0.07
	<b>Colonies</b>	<b>38.871</b>	<b>1.155</b>	<b>0.03</b>	<b>0.000</b>	<b>0.00</b>	<b>1.155</b>	<b>0.03</b>
Total	Empire	394.83	52.522	0.13	36.184	0.09	88.704	0.22

Source: Avner Offer, 'The British Empire, 1870-1914: A Waste of Money?', *Economic History Review*, Vol.46 (1993), p.227.

Other historians, such as P. J. Cain and A. G. Hopkins, have contested the claim that imperial military and naval expenditure caused irreparable domestic

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, pp.224-32.

<sup>41</sup> Corelli Barnett, *The Collapse of British Power* (London, 1972), p.120.

<sup>42</sup> Bernard Porter, *The Lion's Share: A Short History of British Imperialism, 1850-1995* (London, 1996), p.37.

<sup>43</sup> Patrick K. O'Brien, 'The Costs and Benefits of British Imperialism, 1846-1914', *Past and Present*, no.120 (August, 1988), p.200.

<sup>44</sup> Lance Davis and Robert Huttenback, *Mammon and the Pursuit of Empire: The Economics of British Imperialism* (Cambridge, 1988), p.145.

damage, presenting Britain as 'formidably strong' at the outbreak of the First World War, and even after due to her extensive financial and commercial interests, particularly in her 'invisible empire'.<sup>45</sup> In 1991, Gordon Martel et. al. in a special edition of *The International History Review*, also contest the imperial overstretch and decline theory<sup>46</sup>. Martel suggests that rather than acting as a drain on her resources, 'for the first time, Great Britain was able to use military power drawn from the empire to enable her to act as a terrene power on the Continent'<sup>47</sup> during the First World War. He goes on to say that in the interwar period, Britain 'was more powerful than she had been for the 150 years that preceded the Second World War', not merely being 'the pre-eminent world power' but 'the *only* world power'<sup>48</sup>. Avner Offer has also supported this notion, suggesting that 'over and above the *private* returns, Britain also acquired a strategic asset' that 'extended considerably Britain's capacity to wage war, by adding to its military, demographic, and economic resources'.<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, Offer argues that the logistical benefits that the colonies provided the Empire as bases for the Navy and as 'links in the chain of steam-coal navigation and undersea cables' offset their lack of financial contribution towards imperial defence<sup>50</sup>.

These claims have been taken forward by Ashley Jackson, who also attests to the logistical strength of the Empire, a 'global network' which facilitated 'Britain's capacity to move food, goods, munitions and troops from one side of the world to the other', and with vast manpower resources which could be mobilised for both the economic and industrial war as well as on the frontlines, demonstrated most

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<sup>45</sup> P. J. Cain and A. G. Hopkins, *British Imperialism, 1688-2000* (London, 2002), pp.395, 405.

<sup>46</sup> Gordon Martel et al., 'The Decline of Great Britain', *The International History Review*, Vol.13, No.4 (November, 1991), pp.662-783.

<sup>47</sup> Gordon Martel, 'The Meaning of Power: Rethinking the Decline and Fall of Great Britain', *The International History Review*, Vol.13, No.4 (November, 1991), pp.662-694, p.687.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p.692.

<sup>49</sup> Offer, 'The British Empire, 1870-1914', pp.234-6.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p.228.

effectively during the Second World War<sup>51</sup>. Yet, Jackson admits that this capability was neglected and remained largely theoretical until war broke out, with strategic planning failing to keep up with technological progress and the changing geo-political system. He argues that on the eve of the Second World War, 'there was not one adequately defended base throughout the entire Empire when judged against the scale of likely attack using modern weapons', and though the prominence of the Navy within imperial defence strategy was still unquestioned, 'the gap between theory and actuality was now enormous, though there was nothing meaningful that could be done about it. It was a classic case of imperial overstretch'<sup>52</sup>.

As the First World War showed, fighting just the Germans for supremacy in the North Atlantic and the North Sea tied down almost every ship the Royal Navy possessed, and victory was achieved only after extraordinary effort.<sup>53</sup> This sorry state of defensive preparations during the interwar years was created due to reasons of 'economy, domestic politics and international stability':

As a sated power, recovering from the First World War and the effects of the depression, with a population that would not hear of another war and... elected governments only too pleased to translate this into cost-cutting action... To achieve their several aims, Britain's naval power had to be crippled, and its Empire fundamentally weakened and at least partially dismantled.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Ashley Jackson, *The British Empire and the Second World War* (London, 2006), pp.1-4.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p.14.

<sup>53</sup> Phillips Payson O'Brien, p.153.

<sup>54</sup> Jackson, *The British Empire and the Second World War*, p.11.

At the same time, the end of the First World War and the elimination of all major naval threats to Britain in Europe left the Royal Navy in a quandary; having been heavily orientated towards fighting a short-distance war, now it 'had to think again in terms of global strategy and to reconsider factors such as bases, endurance, and sea-keeping qualities in this light'<sup>55</sup>. The Admiralty hoped to create an 'Imperial Fleet' for this purpose, bringing together all the Empire's naval forces under a single unified command. Again, it was hoped this would be part-funded by the Dominions, but as in the past they balked at the cost and preferred to develop their own individual fleets. The 'absolute right of the Dominions and Colonies to control their own budgets' had to be respected, but this could diverge from strategic requirements perceived differently from the metropole and the periphery<sup>56</sup>. In 1919, when the Chancellor of the Exchequer recommended a reduction in the number of capital ships to fifteen, the Admiralty played on fears of a naval race with the United States and Japan, emphasising the loss of prestige and trade and weakened imperial bonds with the Dominions that this might result in.<sup>57</sup>

Just as the First World War had begun with one naval arms race, so it ended with another. The conflict had left Great Britain, the United States (US) and Japan as the three major naval powers in the world, all of whom had a vested interest in the Pacific Rim. The wartime alliance quickly deteriorated into tension and suspicion as both the US and Japan embarked on new naval construction programmes. In the post-war climate, there was not the political and public support, the economic

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<sup>55</sup> The Naval Memoirs of Admiral J.H. Godfrey, iii, pp.11-12, MSS. Churchill College, Cambridge, cited in Paul Haggie, *Britannia At Bay: The Defence of the British Empire against Japan, 1931-1941* (Oxford, 1981), p.1.

<sup>56</sup> Nicholas Tracy (ed.), *The Collective Naval Defence of the Empire, 1900-1940*, Publications of the Navy Records Society, Vol. 136 (Aldershot, 1997), p.ix.

<sup>57</sup> Andrew Field, *Royal Navy Strategy in the Far East, 1919-1939: Preparing for War against Japan* (London, 2004), p.21.

leverage, or the industrial capacity for it to be able to compete with America in naval building and remain on top, as Lloyd George attested to the Committee of Imperial Defence:

[W]e could not fight the United States for economical as well as for military reasons... If the Committee were to decide now that Great Britain must enter into competition with the United States in naval shipbuilding, it would be the biggest decision they have taken since 1914, and conceivably greater... We should be up against the greatest resources of the world. We should be up against a growing and intensely virile population... No British statesman, therefore, could commit his country to what might be a disastrous rivalry, except for the most imperative and convincing reasons.<sup>58</sup>

One potential solution to offset American naval superiority was to renew the Anglo-Japanese alliance, which was due to expire in 1921. Yet, this was one of the main factors behind American naval expansion, so as to readjust the balance of power in the Pacific which was weighted against them as a result of the agreement. Some within the Committee of Imperial Defence, most notably Churchill, believed that rather than securing Britain's interests, renewing the alliance might have the opposite effect and spark an arms race with the US, potentially culminating in war<sup>59</sup>.

The solution was a policy of naval arms limitation between the three powers, concluded at the Washington Conference of 1921-22. This resulted in a ten-year agreement for each navy to limit its number of capital ships by a ratio of 5:5:3, the

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<sup>58</sup> The National Archives (TNA), CAB 2/3, Committee of Imperial Defence, Minutes of the 134th Meeting, 14 December 1920.

<sup>59</sup> Wm. Roger Louis, *British Strategy in the Far East, 1919-1939* (Oxford, 1971), p.54.

total displacement for Britain and US each being 525,000 tons, with 315,000 tons for Japan.<sup>60</sup> No new constructions were to be made for the period of the treaty, and limits were also imposed on gun calibre (16 inches) and aircraft carriers. A 10,000 ton, 8-inch gun limit was set for cruisers, though no total displacement. Similarly, no limits were set for smaller auxiliary craft, used for escort and local defence duties. To ensure American acquiescence, however, Britain had to terminate its alliance with Japan.

Though a consequence of the 1922 Washington Naval Treaty was the preservation of good relations with the US and maintaining British naval parity, it decreased Britain's security in East Asia while proportionately increasing the risk posed to its interests there by turning an ally, Japan, into a potential enemy. It also meant increased responsibilities for the Royal Navy, as Britain's possessions in the region had previously been guarded indirectly by Japan. Thus, the decision was taken to construct a new naval base at Singapore for the fleet to operate from, at an estimated cost of £13million 'in the first instance'<sup>61</sup> but which would more than quadruple by the base's completion, adding further financial strain, despite some subsidies coming from the Straits Settlements, New Zealand, Hong Kong, and the Federated Malay States. The strategic imperative given to Singapore by the termination of the alliance was why the British were determined to keep it out of article XIX of the Treaty, which stipulated the 'status quo... with regard to fortifications and naval bases, shall be maintained'. The area agreed upon was east of the meridian of 110° east longitude, which did, however, encompass Britain's colonies of Hong Kong and Fiji.

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<sup>60</sup> 'Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States: 1922', Vol. 1, pp.247-266, pp.252-3, [http://www.ibiblio.org/pha/pre-war/1922/nav\\_lim.html](http://www.ibiblio.org/pha/pre-war/1922/nav_lim.html).

<sup>61</sup> TNA, ADM 1/8715/189, Letter from Admiralty to the Colonial Office, 22 July 1927, p.2.

The significance of article XIX's imposition was that it meant that if those colonies were to be seriously defended, naval forces would have to play a central role. As a consequence, the long-established policy of not tying naval forces to the local defence of bases would have to be revised.<sup>62</sup> The Committee of Imperial Defence which convened on 14 December that year suggested that a Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve (RNVR) force might be established in Hong Kong to compensate for the restriction on improving Hong Kong's physical defences<sup>63</sup>. This idea that the colonies could contribute to imperial defence by raising local RNVR forces was first suggested to the Imperial Cabinet the previous year. It was only considered viable, however, for those colonies which possessed sizeable white communities, as it was not felt that the 'native' populations could be relied upon to take on this responsibility, and why such a scheme had previously only been pursued in the 'white' Dominions:

Some difficulty may exist in raising local forces of the R.N.V.R. in India and in those Colonies where coloured races predominate... this should not prevent the formation of local detachments composed entirely of Europeans, for it will probably be found at large and prosperous ports, where a considerable proportion of the white community are connected with shipping, and where yachting may be indulged in, that service in a naval corps would be attractive to many.<sup>64</sup>

The restrictions of Washington prompted the Admiralty to revise its aspirations and adopt a new 'one-power standard', though the rather unwieldy syntax and caveats in this policy convey its compromising and less than ideal nature:

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<sup>62</sup> TNA, ADM 116/3125, 'Remarks on Paragraphs in Detail, Part II', p.5.

<sup>63</sup> TNA, CO 323/902, Item 121, M.0311.23, From Committee of Imperial Defence to Admiralty, 21 March 1923.

<sup>64</sup> TNA, CAB 21/187, Empire Naval Policy and Cooperation, February 1921, p.44.



The requirements of a one-Power standard are satisfied if our fleet, wherever situated, is equal to the fleet of any other nation, wherever situated, provided that arrangements are made from time to time in different parts of the world, according as the international situation requires, to enable the local forces to maintain the situation against vital and irreparable damage pending the arrival of the Main Fleet and to give the Main Fleet on arrival sufficient mobility.<sup>65</sup>

Under this doctrine, 'local superiority was not required, and local naval forces could be inferior in strength until the arrival of the main battle fleet'<sup>66</sup>. A more defensive strategy was pursued as the ability of the ageing battle fleet to operate from forward bases such as Hong Kong decreased. Despite this reorientation, a self-confidence prevailed within the service that 'British material and superior training would produce decisive results against Japan'<sup>67</sup>. This outlook was influenced by imperial ideological undertones, in particular the perceived racial superiority of the British at the prospect of fighting an Asian adversary, further reinforced by the latent hegemony in their old teacher-student relationship, quite literally the case for Japanese officers who attended the Britannia Royal Naval College.

The financial climate of the interwar years inevitably took its toll on the Navy. The war had reversed the 1914 balance of service accounts, where the Navy had enjoyed a better than two to one budgetary superiority over the army<sup>68</sup>. As chart 1

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<sup>65</sup> CID definition of 1925, quoted in memorandum by the CNS on the situation prior to the 1935 Naval Conference, ADM 116/2999, quoted in Haggie, *Britannia At Bay*, p.7.

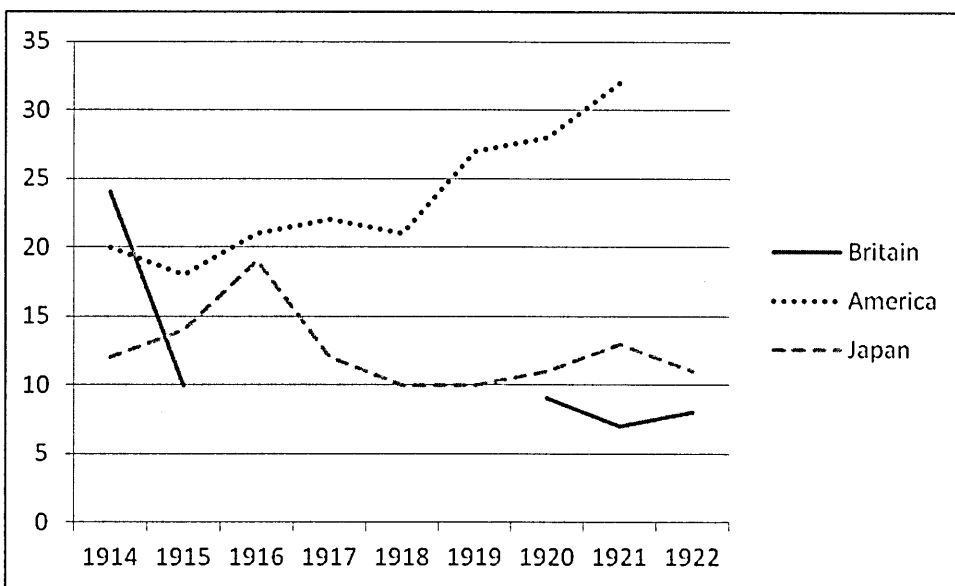
<sup>66</sup> Field, *Royal Navy Strategy in the Far East*, p.11.

<sup>67</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>68</sup> Roger Dingman, *Power in the Pacific: The Origins of Naval Arms Limitation, 1914-1922* (London, 1976), p.109.

demonstrates, the percentage of national expenditure devoted to the Navy had dropped dramatically:

**Chart 1. Naval Expenditure as a percentage of total national expenditure, 1914-1922**



Source: U.S. Department of Commerce, *Historical Statistics of the United States*, cited in Roger Dingman, *Power in the Pacific: The Origins of Naval Arms Limitation, 1914-1922* (London, 1976), p.162.

As the economic situation in Britain worsened, the Royal Navy was exposed to additional cuts, most notably to wages. A committee in 1923 concluded that naval pay was too high relative to other workers and in 1925 an Admiralty Fleet Order established a lower rate of pay for men joining after 5 October of that year. Following the 1929 Wall Street Crash and with the country already in a grave financial state, another committee, chaired by Sir George May, decided that further cuts in naval pay were necessary and that no earlier guarantees regarding the higher rate of pay had been made. Despite the First Sea Lord's protests, the Royal Navy had little choice but to accept the May Committee's recommendations.<sup>69</sup> This led to the Invergordon Mutiny, which shook the Navy in September 1931. Just when the reliability of the

<sup>69</sup> Field, p.13.

existing men was called into question, it had been reported in April of that year that numbers were so reduced that 16,000 reservists would be needed to fully man the fleet; normally the *Queen Elizabeth*-class battleships were each 140 seamen short of complement, and consequently only able to man half the six-inch secondary armament.<sup>70</sup> Yet, the predominance of the battleship remained central to the Admiralty's strategic doctrine of the 1930s:

In maintaining a balanced battle fleet and focusing on an extreme case, war with Japan, the Admiralty was attempting to maintain a fleet capable of a world-wide deployment, and concentrating on a battle fleet, with the battleship at its core, supported by aircraft carriers, cruisers, destroyers and submarines.<sup>71</sup>

This 'big battleship mindset' and its overwhelming focus on maintaining a roaming battle fleet, meant that auxiliary areas of fleet operations were comparatively neglected, such as anti-submarine warfare, minesweeping and local defence. At the same time, though maintaining the security of maritime routes, and the refuelling stations and safe harbours along them would be vital to this roving strategy envisaged, they were relegated to secondary importance. Decreased investment and an ageing fleet prompted the 1931 *Brassey's Naval and Shipping Annual* to paint a bleak assessment of the state of Britain's naval defence:

The close of 1930 found the Royal Navy in a condition not altogether satisfactory to those who believe that the Fleet is still the main bulwark of our

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<sup>70</sup> Haggie, p.9.

<sup>71</sup> Field, p.14.

security. Less money is spent on it; there are fewer ships in hand; replacements are not being provided for as they become due.<sup>72</sup>

This sentiment was echoed in an appreciation prepared for a three-party Committee on Disarmament in April 1931. It stated that Britain had carried out more disarmament than any other nation, while her activity in modernising capital ships and coast defences, and in maintaining essential auxiliary services had been the least, 'thus both absolutely and relatively the strength of the Royal Navy had declined'<sup>73</sup>. By 1933 British naval spending was well below the record low set in 1924 at just 6 per cent of Government expenditure<sup>74</sup>.

The response was the Admiralty's decision to devolve some of the Royal Navy's responsibilities in the colonies to local volunteer reserve units. The relatively lower colonial wages they could offer there, subsidised by local financial contributions, presented a potential solution to these deficits of strategy, finance and manpower. A new Colonial Naval Defence Act was passed in 1931 which legislated for this potentiality, replacing its 1865 predecessor which had covered the Dominions before being superseded by the 1911 Dominion Naval Forces Act. This in itself was an acknowledgement of the lesser priority that had been given previously to colonial naval defence in the Empire and admittance that the Royal Navy was no longer able to meet all of its responsibilities. The frustrated experience of trying to encourage the Dominions to contribute financially to the Navy's upkeep had taught the Admiralty that 'there is no intention of plunging into the old controversy of direct money

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<sup>72</sup> Commander C. Robinson, RN, and H.M. Ross (eds.), *Brassey's Naval and Shipping Annual, 1931* (London, 1931).

<sup>73</sup> Quoted in Haggie, p.9.

<sup>74</sup> Field, p.43.

contributions versus local defence forces'<sup>75</sup>. It was reaffirmed at the Overseas Defence Committee meeting of 23 May 1927 by Captain Egerton, RN, that the best way in which British Colonies could co-operate in the naval defence of the Empire... was by the organisation of local minesweeping forces, manned by local branches of the Royal Naval Reserve or Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve':

From the naval point of view the most important aspect of this question was the organisation of local minesweeping services to ensure that sporadic minelaying would not bring the overseas trade of the Colonies to a standstill, and thereby dislocate the steady flow of shipping in which the empire depended for its very existence.<sup>76</sup>

It was admitted that the Royal Navy could no longer guarantee the defence of colonial trade itself, and 'no reliance could be placed on naval minesweeping vessels being available for this work'. This was because minesweeping was typically carried out by small, slower vessels which would take too long to travel, and 'would be required elsewhere... for keeping the approaches to the Fleet anchorages clear and for safeguarding the approaches to the home ports'<sup>77</sup>. Thus again, despite the threat of Japan, colonial naval defence was given a lower priority to that of Britain.

This came at a worrying time, as Japan began to demonstrate its aggressive ambitions in China. First, it invaded Manchuria in September 1931 under the pretext of the Mukden incident, establishing the puppet state of Manchukuo in February 1932. More significantly for Britain was the short war between Japanese and Chinese nationalist armies in Shanghai between January and March 1932 which directly

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<sup>75</sup> TNA, CAB 21/187, 'Contributions by Colonies towards cost of Naval Defence', p.2.

<sup>76</sup> TNA, CAB 21/187, 'Extract from 278<sup>th</sup> Minutes of the O.D.C. 23.5.27', p.1.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.1-2.

threatened British interests, not only in China, but potentially the rest of the Empire too as officials viewed it as a potential precursor to imperial disintegration:

If Japan continues unchecked the British will have to retire altogether from the Far East. If it is decided that we must check Japan certain preliminary measures could be adopted - such as rupture of diplomatic and economic relations - but in the end Japan can only be checked by force. Ultimately we will be faced with the alternatives of going to war with Japan or retiring from the Far East. A retirement from the Far East might be the prelude to a retirement from India.<sup>78</sup>

The Manchurian and Shanghai crises convinced Britain of its unpreparedness for war in East and Southeast Asia, and in a review of military expenditure in September 1933, short-term priority was given to augmenting the defence of possessions and interests there<sup>79</sup>.

It was short-term because from the early 1930s there had been a shift in strategic thinking back towards Europe as threats other than Japan began to emerge closer to 'home'. In 1930, France and Italy refused to limit their fleets, with the resultant naval rivalry potentially compromising Britain's dominance in the Mediterranean. Meanwhile, the 1933 Defence Requirements Committee identified Germany as the ultimate potential enemy<sup>80</sup>. At the London Naval Conference of 1935-36, there was an acknowledgement that the Royal Navy did not possess the

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<sup>78</sup> *Documents on British Foreign Policy*, ser.2, vol.IX, no.238, note by Sir J. Pratt, 1 February 1932, quoted in Ian Nish, 'Japan in Britain's View of the International System, 1919-37', in Ian Nish (ed.), *Anglo-Japanese Alienation, 1919-1952: Papers of the Anglo-Japanese Conference on the History of the Second World War* (Cambridge, 1982), pp.43-4.

<sup>79</sup> Ian Nish, 'Japan in Britain's View of the International System, 1919-37', in Nish (ed.), *Anglo-Japanese Alienation*, pp.43-4.

<sup>80</sup> Field, p.43, p.99.

strength to adequately protect all corners of the British Empire. A prioritisation of Home defence meant the naval defence of its colonies, particularly in the Pacific Rim, was correspondingly neglected:

A Power with world-wide responsibilities needed adequate defence in every area. Its forces could not be concentrated in one part of the world, for that would mean denuding its home waters of naval defence.<sup>81</sup>

The reality of naval overstretch hit home uncomfortably during the Abyssinian Crisis of 1935. The 'pusillanimous attitude' of the British Government and the Navy towards imposing sanctions on Italy was influenced by a fear that Japan would take advantage of the situation should Britain become embroiled in a conflict in the Mediterranean. The Naval Staff and the Chiefs of Staff Committee in 1937 realised the 'impossibility' of waging a war against Japan at the same time that most of the fleet would be required for duty in European waters. Britain simply did not have enough ships to act as the world's policeman:

We cannot foresee the time when our defence forces will be strong enough to safeguard our territory, trade and vital interests against Germany, Italy and Japan simultaneously.<sup>82</sup>

Admiral of the Fleet Lord Chatfield reaffirmed this bleak forecast and its implications for the wider Empire, the interests of which were consequently subordinated to those of the metropole:

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<sup>81</sup> Lord Monsell, First Lord of the Admiralty, 1936, cited in Arthur J. Marder, *Old Friends, New Enemies: The Royal Navy and the Imperial Japanese Navy, Strategic Illusions, 1936-1941* (Oxford, 1981), p.11.

<sup>82</sup> The Chiefs of Staff, 12 November 1937, quoted in Marder, *Old Friends, New Enemies*, p.26.

Imperially we are exceedingly weak. If at the present time, and for many years to come, we had to send a Fleet to the Far East, even in conjunction with the United States, we should be left so weak in Europe that we should be liable to blackmail or worse.<sup>83</sup>

This pressure forced Britain to review previous policies which disbarred colonial manpower from naval service. Naval Volunteer Forces had already been successfully formed, largely on local impetus, in Hong Kong, the Straits Settlements, Gold Coast and Ceylon. In June 1938 the Overseas Defence Committee of the Committee of Imperial Defence prepared a report emphasising that 'every single Dependency... from the smallest and least well-endowed to the largest and most wealthy, has its own part to play in Imperial Defence'. It admitted that 'at the present time the forces of which the United Kingdom Government disposes are barely sufficient to meet the numerous threats which confront the Empire in all quarters of the world'. By providing for their own local security, the colonies would reduce the demands upon the Royal Navy and thus contribute to the Empire's security as a whole:

At every defended port local naval forces have to be maintained for minesweeping and other local defence duties. For these purposes Naval Volunteer Reserve units are particularly valuable, since they enable a corresponding economy to be made in regular naval personnel, who can

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<sup>83</sup> Admiral of the Fleet Lord Chatfield to Sir Thomas Inskip (Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence), 28 January 1938, quoted in *ibid.*, p.26.



be more profitably employed in other duties requiring a higher standard of technical training.<sup>84</sup>

**Table 2. Colonial Naval Force Complements**

Colonial Force	Naval	Year Formed	Strength Mobilised in 1939		Greatest Known Strength 1942-1943	
			Officers	Men	Officers	Men
Hong Kong RNVR		1933	?	?	167	600
Straits Settlements/ Malayan RNVR		1934/1938	158	650	158	650
Ceylon RNVR		1934	22	142	61	1127
Gold Coast NDF		1936	17	53	15	40
Gambia NVF		1938	8	32	5	63
Zanzibar NDF		1938	6	52	N/A	N/A
Trinidad RNVR		1939	20	110	70	1131
Nigeria NDF		1939	N/A	N/A	55	600
Sierra Leone NVF		1939	N/A	N/A	8	40
Kenya RNVR		1939	7	102	45	724
Tanganyika NVF		1939	11	154	15	160
Fiji RNVR		1939	4	26	30	476
RN (Malay Section)		1939	N/A	400	N/A	1450
Burma RNVR		1940	N/A	N/A	?	?
Mauritius CDS		1941	N/A	N/A	?	?
<b>Total</b>			<b>253</b>	<b>1721</b>	<b>629</b>	<b>7061</b>

Source: TNA, CO 968/145/1, 'Colonial Naval Forces', 1944-1945 and TLDM (Royal Malaysian Navy) Museum, Malacca, 2 July 2009.

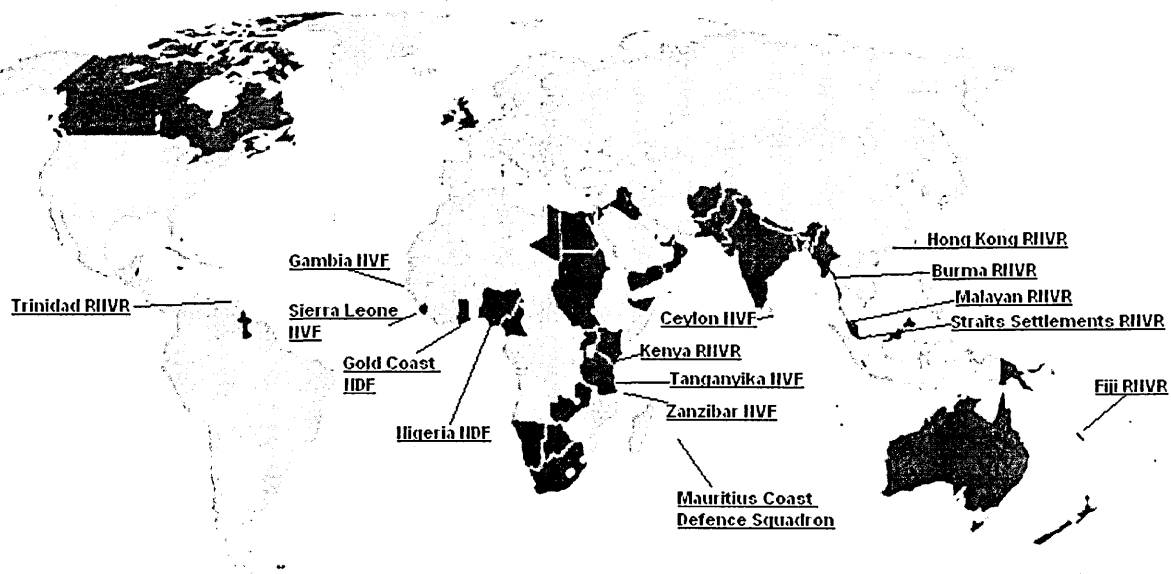
By the end of 1938, Gambia and Zanzibar had formed their own Naval Volunteer Forces<sup>85</sup>, along with a Malayan RNVR unit based at Penang. These were joined by Trinidad, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Kenya, Tanganyika, and Fiji in 1939, Burma in 1940 and Mauritius in 1941. A full-time Royal Navy (Malay Section) was also formed at the start of the Second World War, specifically to provide Malay seamen for Royal Navy

<sup>84</sup> Item 340: Memorandum 'The Co-operation of the Colonial Empire in Imperial Defence', signed by V. Sykes, Secretary, Overseas Defence Committee, 8 June 1938, in Tracy (ed.), *The Collective Naval Defence of the Empire*, pp.587-593.

<sup>85</sup> The nomenclature varies between these naval volunteer units: Naval Volunteer Force, Naval Defence Force, Coast Defence Squadron. Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve status is granted once the force is offered to the Admiralty for general service by the colony's Governor.

vessels on deployment to the East, thus relieving RN regulars for duty in the active European theatre. Cumulatively, these forces provided around eight thousand men for service during the Second World War.

### Map 1. Location of Colonial Naval Forces



RIIVR - Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve IIVF - Naval Volunteer Force IIDF - Naval Defence Force

Britain's preoccupation with its relatively weak East Asian position was not solely dictated by strategic concerns for the protection of its colonies and Dominions in the region. The political and economic situation in China featured prominently in British thinking, the safeguarding of her investments there and in particular 'the myth of the China market':

Again and again the China market was referred to as a place on which the future development of British trade and employment would depend... if British companies were forced to pull out of China, as they threatened to do unless the British Government backed them up, the carry-over effect on

India and the rest of the Empire would be incalculable. Britain's prestige had to be maintained, for it was on this national asset that possibilities for profitable trade and financial gain depended.<sup>86</sup>

Naval power was the physical manifestation of British prestige, and its seeming absence from Britain's further-flung colonies not only fostered concerns regarding their external security, but also the internal political integrity of the Empire, as well as its leverage over non-sovereign countries that it perceived to be within its sphere of influence. To attempt to placate Japan by giving it concessions in China would not only run the risk of antagonising the United States, it would also allow them to swallow up British interests there. Though this would not have been economically shattering to Britain, it would undermine Britain's great power status. Once Japan refused to cooperate on naval limitation, 'there was no *quid pro quo* which could be obtained from her which could compensate for a revelation that Britain could not police her interests or carry out her imperial role in the far eastern and Pacific areas'. Thus, the Foreign Office was not prepared, 'to recommend that a step involving such risks to Britain's image as an imperial power should be taken'<sup>87</sup>.

Yet, not taking action was already achieving just that, and as Ian Nish has argued, Britain 'to a degree lived on illusion. She was conscious of being over-extended and felt vulnerable in the face of actions from restless powers'<sup>88</sup>. During the Tientsin crisis of June 1939, British prestige had diminished to the point where Japan publically demanded that Britain renounce her support of the Chinese nationalists. This led Lord Chatfield to comment that Japan, 'trading on our relatively weak naval

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<sup>86</sup> Stephen Lyon Endicott, *Diplomacy and Enterprise: British China Policy, 1933-1937* (Manchester, 1975), p.184.

<sup>87</sup> Ann Trotter, *Britain and East Asia, 1933-1937* (Cambridge, 1975), pp.213-14.

<sup>88</sup> Nish, 'Japan in Britain's View of the International System, 1919-37', p.53.

position, was insulting British nationals in Tientsin, in a manner that would have made a Georgian or Victorian statesman issue violent ultimatums'<sup>89</sup>. The European situation had become too unstable to consider sending a naval fleet to East Asia.

This chapter has outlined the geopolitical context of the interwar period and the key issues of imperial defence from which colonial naval volunteer forces emerged by the start of the Second World War. Though the time and nature of 'imperial overstretch' has been heavily debated by historians, the interwar years was certainly a period of relative decline for the Royal Navy. The First World War had galvanised aspiring naval rivals, while leaving Britain politically and financially antagonistic to pursuing a new policy of navalism. The Washington Naval Treaty prevented another arms race and meant the Royal Navy was not eclipsed, but left it relatively weaker in that its strength was now only equal to the next largest navy, that being of the United States, compared to its former two-power standard. It also forced the termination of the Anglo-Japanese alliance, meaning Britain now had to look to defend its interests there which had previously been secured by the treaty. Thus decreased security was multiplied by broader responsibilities plus an increased threat in that region. When Japan began asserting itself more aggressively in Asia in the 1930s, it coincided with a more bellicose Italy and a resurgent Germany, thus Britain went from having one major naval threat to consider to three. In this scenario, Europe and the Mediterranean were always going to take priority over East Asia and other imperial peripheries. By the end of the 1930s there was admission that the Royal Navy was no longer able to guarantee the security of the whole Empire, and

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<sup>89</sup> Quoted in Marder, p.35.

prompted the colonies to contribute more to their own local defence, both in terms of finance and manpower.

British imperial security relied on psychological as well as physical fortification, however. It has been argued that the British Empire was able to sustain itself by perpetuating 'the convenient belief held by non-British people that armed forces could be summoned up at will for immediate deployment in any part of the world'<sup>90</sup>. Prestige thus acted as a substitute for actual naval and military strength:

Few people appreciated the yawning gap between defence theory on the one hand, and actual power on the other. Although this gap had been widening since the late nineteenth century, the illusion of *Pax Britannica* and the grey guardians roaming the sea lanes of the world was still etched on the British national consciousness, and on that of its Empire.<sup>91</sup>

When analysing the development of colonial naval volunteer forces, one must therefore not view them merely as a strategic response to problems of local and imperial defence, but also consider the ideological role they played in fortifying British 'prestige' and authority in the wider Empire, particularly as they came under the dual pressures of nationalism and war.

The following case studies will analyse colonial responses in more detail, and assess the degree to which they strengthened the imperial system, both in terms of naval defence and reinforcing British hegemony, or whether imperial racial stereotyping and discrimination that had inhibited the devolution of such

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<sup>90</sup> Ged Martin, 'Was there a British Empire?', *Historical Journal*, Vol.15 (1972), pp.562-69, cited in Keith Jeffrey, 'The Second World War', in Judith M. Brown and Wm. Roger Louis (eds.), *The Oxford History of the British Empire: Volume IV The Twentieth Century* (Oxford, 1999), p.306.

<sup>91</sup> Jackson, p.15.

responsibilities to the non-white colonies in less-stretched times, in fact contributed to the post-war break-up of the Empire.

## Case Study One: The Caribbean

### Introduction

As has been discussed in the previous chapter, for most of the interwar period, the main threat envisaged to the British Empire came from Japan, reflected in the early priority given to colonial naval defence in East and Southeast Asia. Yet, imperial overstretch by its nature meant that Empire defence could not be focused on any one region against any singular enemy. It presented, in essence, a domino effect. The Royal Navy's revised 'one-power standard' following the Washington Treaty meant that should war break out against a major power, virtually its entire regular fleet would have to be mobilised to meet that threat. This would leave other areas of the Empire unguarded and potential prey to an opportunistic aggressor.

On the other side of the world to Asia lay Britain's Caribbean colonies, a legacy of its earliest imperial ventures, yet an increasingly costly one, as its relative economic value declined with market demand for its traditional cash crops, exacerbated by the Great Depression. Poverty, unemployment and crime fuelled nationalist agitation during the 1930s, raising internal defence costs further. Yet within this classic example of imperial overstretch, with its diverging cost-benefits, lay one significant strategic and economic virtue. It included the only oil-producing territory in the formal Empire, and Britain's main source in the Western hemisphere: the island of Trinidad. Since the First World War, the Royal Navy had largely moved from coal-powered, steam-drive ships to oil-fired ones, thus the fate of Trinidad was in its service interest. The rise of Fascist Germany and Italy during the 1930s

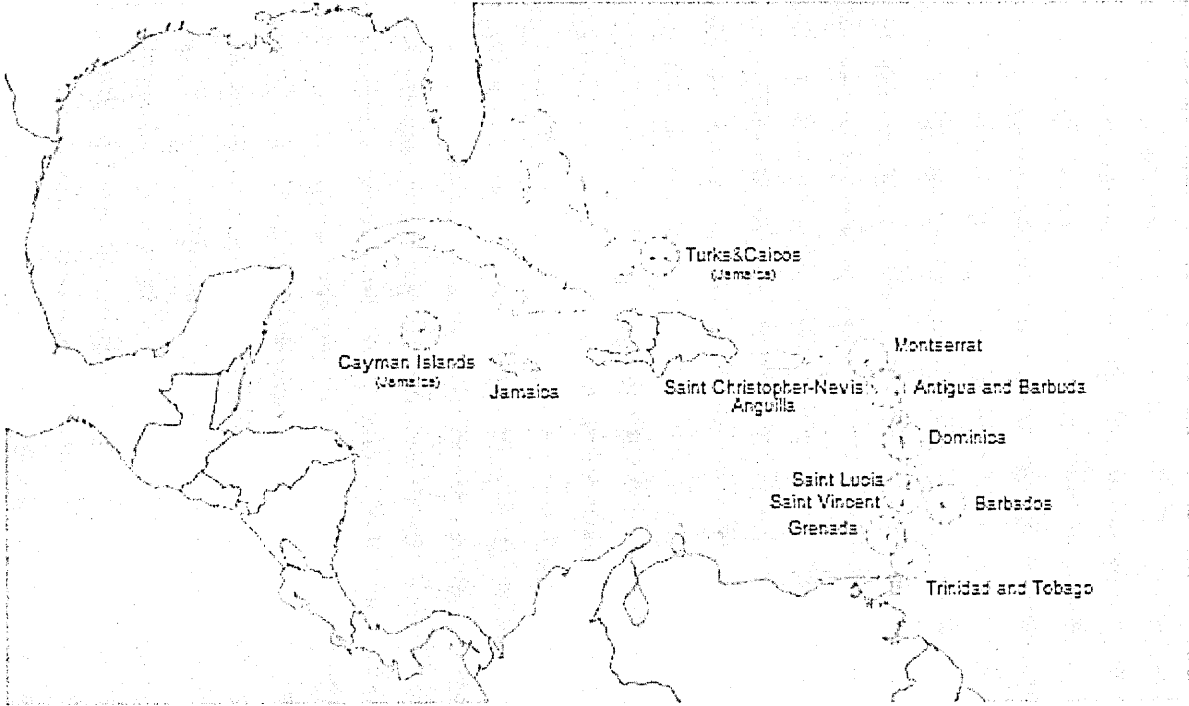
presented the prospect of fighting a two-hemisphere war with a one-power navy, stretching the Navy's resources to the limit and posing a threat in the Atlantic too. The potentiality of war in the Pacific thus indirectly impacted upon the local defence of Britain's Caribbean colonies, and the Trinidad Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve (TRNVR) was formed to relieve some of the operational shortfall. In addition to its strategic value, which as this case study will show was variable, the TRNVR also had a political purpose, as a bulwark for British imperial prestige in the region. In this regard, Britain's opponent was not so much Germany, but colonial nationalism, and its wartime 'ally' the United States. Thus the Caribbean offers an important case study for analysing British responses to its declining imperial influence before decolonisation.

Beginning by contextualising the force's origins, this section of the thesis will explore the key imperial concerns of oil and nationalism in Trinidad, tensions of imperial versus local defence, and the issues raised by early service life, recruitment, and expansion. Part one will provide a point of ethnic comparison by examining the experience of the Cayman Islanders who volunteered to serve in the cosmopolitan West Indian TRNVR. It will explore the ideological motivations for both those volunteering to serve, and the naval recruiters selecting them; the impact of colonial prejudice and cross-cultural interactions; the causes and effects of service discontent and protest; and the role of identity and historical memory in cultivating imperial and service loyalty. Part two will analyse Trinidad itself: the American 'invasion' of the island following the 1940 Destroyers for Bases Agreement; the significance of Calypso warriorhood and masculinity in naval volunteering and culture; the influence of wartime propaganda on reinforcing imperial hierarchies; and debates regarding



the post-war role of the naval force, centring on issues of professionalism, prestige and prejudice.

**Map 2. The British West Indies**



[Source: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/West\\_Indies\\_Federation](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/West_Indies_Federation)]

## Origins

A detachment of petty officers and seamen from Trinidad, Jamaica and Barbados had served in the Royal Navy during the First World War<sup>92</sup>, yet it was not until 1939 that serious discussion took place regarding the utilisation of local manpower in an indigenous naval unit. Trinidad's geographical position made it accessible to favourable ocean currents into the western Atlantic. If the island fell into enemy hands, primarily Germany, the deployment of U-boats would pose a significant menace to British shipping by opening up a second front in an Atlantic war. The Admiralty's primary concern, however, was clear: 'there is no doubt that in war the safeguarding of oil supplies from Trinidad is one of the greatest importance... and that this is essentially an Imperial interest'<sup>93</sup>. In 1938 Trinidad was the largest producer of oil within the British Empire, contributing 38 per cent of its consumption<sup>94</sup>. Furthermore, that year, the Committee of Imperial Defence, on the recommendation of the Oil Board, had ranked the colony higher in strategic importance than Rangoon in Burma and Bahrain in the Persian Gulf as a source of oil for Britain, largely due to its geographical location to the west of the Suez/Mediterranean route<sup>95</sup>.

Any German occupation of Trinidad would also potentially open up the vast oil fields of Venezuela. Furthermore, at Pitch Lake, Trinidad possessed the world's largest deposit of Asphalt in the world, and the island's location also made it

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<sup>92</sup> H.C. Ferraby, *The Imperial British Navy: How the colonies began to think imperially about the future of the navy* (London 1918), p.95.

<sup>93</sup> TNA, ADM 1/10969, Minute Sheet No. 1, M.05222/39.

<sup>94</sup> Vernon C. Mulchansingh, 'The Oil Industry in the Economy of Trinidad', *Caribbean Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (April, 1971), pp.73-100, p.73.

<sup>95</sup> Cited in Fitzroy A. Baptiste, 'The European possessions in the Caribbean in World War II: dimensions of great power co-operation and conflict', Ph.D. thesis (University of the West Indies (UWI), Trinidad and Tobago, 1981), p.21.

strategically central to the protection of important bauxite shipping from British Guiana, a key component in radio and aircraft production.

Pressure for stronger defences was also being exerted from business interests on the island. Yet, it was the internal threat posed by members of the island's black community which concerned them more than any potential German threat at this time. Through the 1930s Trinidadian nationalism had been on the rise, evincing itself in labour protest, and culminating in the bloody Butler riots of June 1937. In a meeting held at the Colonial Office on Monday 8 May 1939, Mr Ashley Cooper, Chairman of Trinidad Leaseholds Limited, raised the issue of labour agitation on the island. Construction of an iso-octane plant meant that a 'considerable amount' of labour would have to be imported from other areas of Trinidad and potentially from outside the island to meet the needs. In Cooper's opinion, this situation held 'explosive elements' that 'would 'provide a good opportunity for agitators to raise trouble'<sup>96</sup>. His opinions followed several incidents of trouble which had taken place over the preceding months, namely two cases of sabotage of the tanks at the Kern Oilfields, as well as three strikes at Guayaguayare, two at Apex, and one at the Pitch Lake. In addition to local economic causes there were a number of known agitators<sup>97</sup>. An expensive consequence of this was that 'insurance with Lloyds involved higher premiums for Trinidad than in most other parts of the world'<sup>98</sup>. Cooper proposed that 'the situation would never get out of hand if half a Company of white troops were permanently stationed there'<sup>99</sup>. He believed that using black or 'coloured' troops would merely stoke the political fires inflamed by the

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<sup>96</sup> TNA, ADM 1/10969, 'Defence of Trinidad Oil Refineries, Note of a Meeting held at the Colonial Office on Monday, 8th May', pp.2-3.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.3-4.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p.4.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, p.2.

black labour movement. Though the Governor of Trinidad, Sir Hubert Young, refused to be drawn on admitting there was a unique problem on the island, he did acknowledge that 'it might be a good plan to have a local unit stationed near the oilfields', as 'the danger of internal trouble would be increased if external attack came, and this raised the general question of the defence of Trinidad'<sup>100</sup>. It was suggested that HMS *Terror*, an *Erebus*-class monitor which at that time was serving as guard-ship at Singapore, might be dispatched for this purpose. Yet this idea was dismissed by the Admiralty, as unpractical as it would be vulnerable anchored as a floating battery off Trinidad, requiring a 'considerable' amount of anti-submarine protection for itself, and would only be able to protect one of the two existing refineries<sup>101</sup>. The issue of the island's naval defence had now been pressed to the forefront, however, and in early July 1939 HMS *Ajax* was dispatched to Trinidad to prepare a report into establishing a locally-raised naval force on the island. As soon as war broke out it became 'essential that the force should come into being without delay'<sup>102</sup>, and it was inaugurated in October 1939.

Very early on in the life of the new Trinidad Naval Volunteer Force (TNVF), a Naval Volunteer Ordinance was submitted by the Governor of Trinidad on 22 July 1940 to amend the original 1939 version. This allowed, in summary<sup>103</sup>:

- The colony to maintain and use 'vessels of war'.
- The Governor may offer to place said vessels at His Majesty's disposal for general service in the Royal Navy and vessel so maintained.

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid., p.4

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., pp.5-6.

<sup>102</sup> TNA, ADM 1/10969, Para. 3, M.08060/39.

<sup>103</sup> TNA, ADM 1/10969, 'Naval Volunteer and Defence Ordinance, 1940', p.3.

- Officers and men of the Force were liable to service and training outside the territorial limits of the colony.
- Royal Navy regulations for the enforcement of discipline to apply to the Force.
- Officers and men may be entered into general service with the Royal Navy in emergency.

To understand the legal and strategic nature of these colonial naval forces being studied, the meaning of 'vessels of war' needs clarification here. Within the 1931 Colonial Naval Act, to which all subsequent colonial naval ordinances were subject, a naval volunteer force raised in a colony was limited to its 'territorial waters' unless a provision is made to place said force at 'His Majesty's disposal', at which point such vessels could theoretically be deployed anywhere on the globe. Within British naval doctrine, only then could a ship be considered a 'vessel of war', as naval warfare was dictated by engaging enemy ships on the high seas before they posed a threat to the shore; a ship sitting outside a port was merely an extra stationary battery<sup>104</sup>. It is this philosophy which traditionally distinguished 'imperial defence' from 'local defence'<sup>105</sup>. There was also a political dimension to this debate, however. If a colony was able to deploy its own naval forces to areas outside of its territorial waters independently of the Admiralty, it would expose Britain to liability for that force's autonomous actions:

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<sup>104</sup> TNA, ADM 116/2396, Items 47-8.

<sup>105</sup> Such debates also featured in debates regarding Australian naval defence surrounding the 1887 Colonial Conference. See Daniel Owen Spence, 'Australian Naval Defence and the 1887 Colonial Conference: Context, Policy and Reaction', *International Journal of Naval History*, Vol.6, No.1 (April 2007), [www.ijnhonline.org](http://www.ijnhonline.org).

Upon the High Seas, in reference to other States and the Governments of other countries, it would be impossible for the Imperial Government to divest itself of the responsibility which might be incurred by the acts of Colonial officers<sup>106</sup>

Such actions could potentially contravene international maritime law, with these 'naval militia' potentially being branded as privateers, with captures "liable to be condemned as prizes"<sup>107</sup>. Moreover, if a colony was able to project naval force independently outside its territorial waters, it would provide that colony with a means of exerting an independent foreign policy, and thus consequently diminish its political reliance on Britain, thereby potentially strengthening the case advanced by colonial nationalists.

By including a provision for the Governor to place the TNVF at 'His Majesty's disposal' and thus make its ships and men liable for service globally in the Royal Navy, the force became the Trinidad Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve (TRNVR) in January 1941. Despite this provision being offered immediately by the Governor, however, the Admiralty initially refused to take control of the TRNVR because of the corresponding shift in administrative responsibility<sup>108</sup>, which negatively affected force morale and caused 'extreme disappointment' amongst some its members<sup>109</sup>. Wrangling between the Governor and the Admiralty over force expenditure was a key factor and inhibited the TRNVR's urgent need for expansion to meet its growing wartime commitments. This led the Commander-in-Chief America and West Indies in

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<sup>106</sup> TNA, ADM 116/2396, 'Extract from Colonial Office letter to Admiralty of 1st October, 1860', Item 48.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> TNA, ADM 1/23215, Admiralty's communication no. 1617/14/12/40, 15 December 1940, to C-in-C America and West Indies.

<sup>109</sup> TNA, ADM 1/23215, Captain in Charge Trinidad's communication no. 14/185/3001, 19 November 1940, to C-in-C America and West Indies, p.4.

December 1940 to comment that the 'local Government has lost interest in [the] force and regards it as an incubus', causing a 'depressing effect on prestige and esprit de corps'<sup>110</sup>. Furthermore, the fact that the 'TNVF being part of locally raised forces is technically under Administration of officer I/C [in command] local forces who is an army officer', was an association 'undesirable in view of increasing importance of naval service in Trinidad', and compounded by traditional inter-service rivalry, led to 'administrative delays and disputes as to liability for certain expenditures'<sup>111</sup>. As a consequence of this, the Admiralty decided to finally accept the offer to place the TRNVR at its disposal.

The TNVF was placed under the command of Lieutenant Commander D. St. G. Lindsay of the Royal Canadian Navy, who appropriately had a background in minesweeping having formerly been Commanding Officer (CO) of the minesweeping trawler HMCS *Festubert*. The force possessed an initial complement of 15 officers and 110 ratings. Despite there being no formal recruiting campaign at the outset, 'five times more men than needed volunteered from all parts of the colony'<sup>112</sup>. Its early officers were selected primarily from white, rural police officers, colonial authority figures with experience of commanding black subordinates and preserving internal order and discipline, but with little seagoing experience<sup>113</sup>, and of 'average ability'.<sup>114</sup> The ratings were mainly made up from the island's black and East Indian communities. As Trinidadians were seen as lacking in British notions of natural 'sea-

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<sup>110</sup> TNA, ADM 1/23215, C-in-C America and West Indies' communication no. 1204/19/12/40 to Admiralty, 19 December 1940.

<sup>111</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>112</sup> *The Trinidad Guardian*, 22 December 1939, p.1.

<sup>113</sup> TNA, ADM 1/23215, 'A Short Story of the Trinidad Royal Naval Reserve', p.1.

<sup>114</sup> TNA, ADM 1/23215, 'Future of the Trinidad Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve', From The Senior British Naval Officer, Trinidad, To The Senior British Naval Officer, Western Atlantic, 17 July 1944, p.3.

mindedness', the Royal Navy sent a couple of retired Chief Petty Officers, Merry, a Gunners Mate, and Cowley, a Torpedo Gunners Mate, in order to instruct the force technically and 'breathe naval atmosphere over it', in the process 'earning the affection of all'<sup>115</sup>. Still, the force in its early days was stretched, under-strength both in terms of men and equipment. The 'fleet' was initially made up of four motor launches running 'practically continuously', the *Lady Hollis*, *Berwind*, *Bin*, and *Lobillia*, the last of which caused much 'excitement' amongst the men due to her 'predilection for catching fire'<sup>116</sup>. These limited resources prevented the force from engaging a potential enemy directly, and so alternative tactics had to be employed, leading to other launches including three speedboats being fitted with smoke dispensers so as to fill the Bocas del Dragón (Dragon's Mouth) with smoke should a raider approach. They also offered little spare time for the instruction of the men<sup>117</sup>.

Despite the publicised rush of volunteers, likely driven by economic hardships and perhaps exaggerated to stimulate wartime recruitment and create a sense of imperial unity, the TNVF initially lacked prestige locally, its members being branded ignominiously as 'Venezuelan Admirals', and 'Customs clerks'<sup>118</sup>. It was not easy to establish the force's authority. For example, when on patrol, *Lady Hollis* signalled for another ship to stop. She slowed down sufficiently for *Lady Hollis* to come up with her but did not stop, leading an indignant Lieutenant Commander Blakeney to hail "stop, or I will put one up your stern". This prompted the dismissive reply, "do not make so much noise or you will wake the passengers and if you get impudent I will drop a

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<sup>115</sup> 'A Short Story of the Trinidad Royal Naval Reserve', p.2.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, p.2.

<sup>117</sup> TNA, ADM 1/23215, Senior Naval Officer Trinidad's communication no. 14/185/756, 3 August 1940, to Commander-in-Chief America and West Indies.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, p.3.



barrel of cement on you and sink you"<sup>119</sup>. The TNVF may not have met the professional standards of the Royal Navy. Official radio communications would be interrupted by unauthorised expletives such as "get off my foot you land lubber... sorry for this clumsy apology for a sailor". Accommodation was poor, and cooking had to be done outside under the palm trees, a task made difficult during the wet season. The service lacked much in terms of equipment, including any signal rockets, and so a local 'expert' was called in and a trial of his wares was arranged on the beach under Commander Lindsay's supervision, but instead of going skywards 'Lindsay had to run for his life as the rocket chased him along the beach'<sup>120</sup>. In 1940 a signal station was built on Chacachacare Island, and to keep the station supplied two donkeys were bought and named 'Ajax' and 'Dundee' after the Royal Navy ships of those names. As the station was a Royal Naval one and not TNVF, Ajax and Dundee became the first Able Seaman, RN, on the books in Trinidad. When on 18 May 1940 Italy suffered her first ship casualty of the war by the sinking in Trinidad of the freighter *Alrinira Lights*, it was ironically attributed to the fact that 'when this ship saw the formidable TNVF fleet she promptly scuttled herself!'<sup>121</sup> Though such stories demonstrate the good humour of the force, at least in its early days, their self-deprecation emphasises its amateurish nature, displaying a general lack of respect towards the naval service and the professional standards expected of it by the Admiralty, which would later undermine group cohesion and discipline.

The local youth organisations were targeted as a source of ready-made recruits, and specifically 'the signaller squad was drawn from senior members of the Boy Scouts, keen young Trinidadians who learned Morse and semaphore without

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid., p.2.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., p.3.

thinking that their proficiency would become a vital link in the Colony's defence chain<sup>122</sup>. Among these scouts was the future celebrated Caribbean literary figure Sam Selvon.

Selvon left school in 1939 at 16, with his sole qualification, he said, being his Boy Scout first aid knowledge. He initially worked in a garage, then in the Trinidad oil fields as a safety inspector, before volunteering for the TRNVR. Selvon admits that 'I don't think we had any idea of serving our country or defending our home island, no thought of fighting for humanity. To tell the truth our interest in the war was only casual and only the adventurous urge of youth led us to volunteer'<sup>123</sup>. Despite British reservations regarding Trinidadian 'seamindedness', the strongest pull factor for Selvon was the 'call of the sea', which he and his friend 'B' already exercised through the sea scouts:

May 1940 found me restless and eager to go to sea I used to talk of ships all day, and never a schooner or steamer or tanker pulled in at the jetty without our knowing it... In San Fernando, where we lived, every spare hour was spent on the sea, and our parents were often scared to death when we were becalmed for hours in the Gulf and nightfall found us still at sea. Any mention of work on a ship was drowned with protests, and we decided we had to work out some scheme if our lust for sea life was to be satisfied.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> *Trinidad Guardian*, 5 November 1939, p.2.

<sup>123</sup> Sam Selvon, 'We Join the Navy', *Guardian Weekly*, 14 December 1946, Item 549, Sam Selvon Collection, UWI, Trinidad and Tobago.

<sup>124</sup> *Idem*.

They were initially turned away at Port of Spain, despite the fact that 'we even pleaded in vain - even got patriotic'. If patriotism was merely deployed as a last-gasp tactic to curry favour, personal status was an important motive for volunteering. Selvon adds that 'in the town, naval ratings looked especially smart in their khaki uniforms and peaked hats', which appealed. It also represented camaraderie and an exclusive group that Selvon wanted membership of, reinforced by 'sailors who looked indifferently to us, and laughed and joked among themselves. How we envied them!<sup>125</sup> Having received a tip-off to try the TRNVR HQ at Staubles Bay, they were told that only option was to join the Communications Division as there was no need for additional seamen. Selvon went on to serve as a wireless operator on minesweepers and Motor Torpedo Boats (MTBs) until the end of the war, which was where he acquired one of his pen-names, 'Ack-Ack', being a code signal to identify an unknown ship.<sup>126</sup> His period in the Navy proved to be a formative one for his future literary career. Since he used his time during the long watches to write poetry and short stories<sup>127</sup>, winning several prizes, and leading the Editor of the "Naval Bulletin" to commend 'his style and ability as a coming journalist'<sup>128</sup>.

Trinidad's growing importance in the war as a convoy port led to the appointment of a Flag Officer in Charge, with Rear Admiral Hodges hoisting his flag in HMS *Benbow*. Under his leadership expansion plans continued apace, four more anti-submarine and patrol vessels, 24 officers and 195 additional ratings were acquired for the force. Because of the TRNVR's existing heavy commitments it was

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<sup>125</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>126</sup> Sam Selvon, *Foreday Morning: Selected Prose 1946-1986* (Essex, 1989), p.vii.

<sup>127</sup> 'Biographical Sketch', Marilyn Geofroy, *A guide to the Samuel Selvon Collection: Manuscripts, Short Stories and Plays*, p.4, UWI, Trinidad and Tobago.

<sup>128</sup> Reference from Communications Officer, HMS *Benbow*, 21 September 1945, Box 7, Folder 627, Sam Selvon Collection, UWI, Trinidad and Tobago.

decided by the Royal Navy to preclude their withdrawal clause for service elsewhere, retaining them in 'local waters' except for an emergency<sup>129</sup>. More implicit in this decision however is the influence of racial thinking. It was raised by the Captain-in-Charge at Port of Spain that as the force was composed of 'white, coloured and black personnel', 'it would be difficult to discriminate in the selection of white personnel only, for service overseas, without causing considerable discontent'. The solution suggested was for the coloured and black ratings to be sent to 'tropical climates only', and only with 'forces already employing such persons'. The paradox of this 'non-discriminatory' alternative appears to have gone unnoticed. It was further considered that 'if ratings have to qualify in accordance with naval standards, that the standard of intellect will debar practically all coloured and black ratings from general service in the Royal Navy'<sup>130</sup>. Their unsuitability for general service was blamed on their perceived innate racial deficiencies rather than on the inadequate training provided them, a defect which would have recognised British culpability, undermining the rulers' racial and moral authority.

Force expansion came at the same time as Trinidadians were drawn to higher paid construction work on the new American bases established there following the 1940 Destroyers-for-Bases agreement<sup>131</sup>, indicating how financial motives predominated within this group. This fostered a perception that 'most Trinidadians do not like the sea'<sup>132</sup>, despite the presence of individuals such as Selvon, and demonstrating how 'seafaring race' theory could arise in response to external

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<sup>129</sup> TNA, ADM 1/23215, C-in-C America and West Indies' communication no. 191/1025, 4 March 1941, to Admiralty.

<sup>130</sup> TNA, ADM 1/23215, Captain in Charge Port of Spain's report no. 27/2359/3665, 12 February 1941, to the C-in-C American and West Indies' station, pp.2-3.

<sup>131</sup> TNA, CO 537/1891, Item 28, 'Trinidad Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve', 1946, p.2.

<sup>132</sup> Norman Rudolph McLaughlin, *The Forgotten Men of the Navy* (Miami, 2002), prelude.

political and economic factors. Recruitment was consequently expanded to encompass Britain's other West Indian colonies. Guyanese volunteers started to arrive from July 1941, preference being given to men with knowledge of engineering and previous experience aboard ships<sup>133</sup>. In June 1942, 80 men were brought from Barbados for training, a contribution which eventually grew to 349, giving it the second largest representation in the force after Trinidad. Additional contingents arrived from ten of Britain's other West Indian colonies, growing the TRNVR to 75 officers and 1,215 men by the end of the war, and making it a truly cosmopolitan West Indian force<sup>134</sup>:

**Table 3. TRNVR ratings per West Indian colony, April-June 1945**

<b>Colony</b>	<b>Complement</b>
Trinidad	501
Tobago	39
Barbados	349
British Guiana	53
Grenada	56
St. Vincent	36
Antigua	13
Montserrat	1
St. Kitts	3
Caymans	124
St. Lucia	33
Dominica	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,215</b>

Source: TNA, ADM 1/23215, 'Appreciation of Naval Organisation In The West Indies After The War', Senior British Naval Officer, Trinidad, 3 June 1945, Appendix "A".

<sup>133</sup> *The Daily Argosy*, 29 July 1941, in Oliver Marshall (ed.) - *The Caribbean at War, British West Indians in World War II* (London 1992), p.25.

<sup>134</sup> TNA, ADM 1/23215, 'Appreciation of Naval Organisation In The West Indies After The War', Senior British Naval Officer, Trinidad, 3 June 1945, Appendix "A".

While the majority of the ratings were classed as 'coloured', only 12 of the officers were non-white<sup>135</sup>. The extension of recruitment across the Caribbean raised issues around the status of different West Indian groups. The British came to favour the Cayman Islanders<sup>136</sup>, and it is their special standing which merits further analysis.

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<sup>135</sup> TNA, ADM 1/23215, C-in-C America and West Indies Station to Admiralty, A.W.I.No.493/820/4, 2 November 1951.

<sup>136</sup> TNA, ADM 1/23215, C-in-C America and West Indies' communication no. 191/102/5, 4 March 1941, to Captain in Charge Port of Spain.

## Part One: The Cayman Islands

During the Second World War, out of a population of just over 6,500, around 800 Caymanians served in the British Merchant Navy<sup>137</sup> with another 201 in the TRNVR, two-thirds of the adult male population<sup>138</sup>, and constituting the highest contribution per capita of any Allied country. The obvious explanation for the level and nature of this participation was that an intrinsic connection to the sea permeated every facet of Caymanian society. Whereas other West Indian islanders 'remained tied to the land even in postslavery times and... viewed their coastlines as boundaries or barriers', the Caymans' lack of terrestrial resources meant that they always 'depended on the sea as a resource and an avenue for survival'<sup>139</sup>. Many of its early settlers had been British mariners wrecked on the islands, and the local economy was dominated by turtling, rope-making and boatbuilding<sup>140</sup>. Even this was mobilised during wartime, with the Caymanian master shipwright, Captain Royal Bodden, being commissioned to construct two wooden minesweepers for the Royal Navy<sup>141</sup>. Such maritime traditions were passed down through generations, and it was considered that in Cayman, 'every able-bodied man is, or has been, a seafarer'<sup>142</sup>. As soon as they could walk, boys would start sailing model boats, and 'by the time they are in their teens [they could] handle the local cat boats, craft about 20 feet long,

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<sup>137</sup> James H. S. Billmyer, 'The Cayman Islands', *Geographical Review*, Vol.36, No.1 (1946), pp.29-43, p.34.

<sup>138</sup> Michael Craton, *Founded Upon the Seas: A History of the Cayman Islands and Their People* (Kingston, 2003), p.291.

<sup>139</sup> Roger C. Smith, *The Maritime Heritage of the Cayman Islands* (Florida, 2000), p.51.

<sup>140</sup> Billmyer, 'The Cayman Islands', p.33.

<sup>141</sup> *The Northwester*, March 1974, pp.6-8.

<sup>142</sup> A. J. A. Douglas, 'The Cayman Islands', *The Geographical Journal*, Vol.95, No.2 (1940), pp.126-131, p.128

pointed at each end and built of island timber'<sup>143</sup>. The 1934 census recorded fifty per cent of the islands' manpower between 18 and 60 years of age as being engaged in the seafaring industry<sup>144</sup>, and the biggest event of the year was the annual sailing regatta.

## **Motivations**

Typically, both group and personal motivations inspired volunteering, but imperial patriotism was a very powerful driving force for Caymanians. This was exhibited on the eve of the Second World War, when 'large numbers of people of all classes of the community anxious to serve their KING and COUNTRY in the present crisis' stepped forward, despite there being 'no plans for recruiting nor any need for such generously afforded services' at that time<sup>145</sup>. This zeal had not diminished by the time the TRNVR began recruiting there in early 1941, as one volunteer later recounted:

The old and young alike from Cayman offered their services to go and fight for their mother country, including myself... I was a young boy, still in my teens, proud to go and fight for my country.<sup>146</sup>

To Caymanians, despite never having seen it themselves, Britain represented 'my country', so that her conflict was consequently their own. Part of this bond was forged

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid., pp.128-9.

<sup>144</sup> Cayman Islands National Archive (CINA), 'Colonial Report 1937', p.13.

<sup>145</sup> CINA, 'Government Notice, No.98/39', 30 August 1939.

<sup>146</sup> McLaughlin, *The Forgotten Men of the Navy*, prelude.



by a shared belief in the 'call of the sea', an innate characteristic of maritime peoples, which determined that Caymanians would naturally seek out a life on the waves. As put by one volunteer, T. Ewart Ebanks, 'most of the young people, then, all they had in their life... on their mind, is to go to sea.'<sup>147</sup>

Peer pressure and lack of domestic employment opportunity drove some to sign up, with Roosevelt Rankine saying 'I thought everybody else could go and I could do the same too... Twenty-four and no special job, I just wanted to get off the island.'<sup>148</sup> The relatively poor state of the local economy acted as a key motivator for many:

It came up that we had want [sic] people to go to Trinidad in the Navy...

So I say that's a good chance... time for me, now, to make some money...

a dollar a day... \$30 to the month.<sup>149</sup>

Although those who chose to join the Merchant Navy could earn higher wages, some volunteers saw greater prestige and significance in service in the Royal Navy, an attraction which overrode the desire for pure monetary gain:

Sometimes I felt I would rather have been in the Merchant Marine, the Merchant Navy, but I guess that was because you would make more money... but it wasn't altogether that... in the Navy you know you had the feeling you was doing a more important job.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> CINA, Interview with T. Ewart Ebanks (1), conducted by Heather McLoughlin, 19 February 2003, transcript p.20.

<sup>148</sup> CINA, Interview with Roosevelt Rankine (2), conducted by Heather McLoughlin, 15 January 1991, transcript p.2, p.5.

<sup>149</sup> Interview with T. Ewart Ebanks (1), p.21.

<sup>150</sup> CINA, Interview with Carley Ebanks, conducted by Liz Scholefield, 31 May 1996, transcript p.18.

As with martial race theory, anthropological studies were also used to set apart Caymanians from other West Indians in a number of physical and moral respects, which made them more appealing to prospective naval recruiters:

The average Caymanian is probably of better physique, is healthier, and has a better intelligence than the average American or the inhabitants of any other island in the West Indies and the countries bordering the Caribbean. This is attributable primarily to his energetic life. Other factors are his higher moral standards and the absence on the island of the usual tropical diseases.<sup>151</sup>

The reference to the Caymanians' 'energetic life' is particularly illuminating since the British typically depicted those native to tropical climates as lethargic. Caymanians were considered 'hard-working'<sup>152</sup>, and 'honest'<sup>153</sup>, on account of their religiosity, and therefore complemented the Admiralty's desire that 'special consideration should be given to providing men who can stand a tropical climate, and who can be relied on to work without constant supervision'<sup>154</sup>. Possessing 'but little feeble-mindedness', the 'average Caymanian possesses an unusually good intellect'<sup>155</sup>, seen as connected to skin colour. Significantly, the majority of the population of the Caymans were white or mixed race, with a comparatively small ex-slave population:

Most of the people are hardy and healthy, tall, and wiry, like their seafaring forefathers from the east coasts of England and Scotland... The proportion

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<sup>151</sup> Billmyer, 'The Cayman Islands', p.42.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., p.40.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., p.41.

<sup>154</sup> TNA, ADM 1/10969, 'Page 7, to Enclosure to "AJAX'S" Letter No. 0196 of 19th July 1939'.

<sup>155</sup> Billmyer, 'The Cayman Islands', pp.41-2.

of whites and mixed to blacks is considerably higher than in most of the other islands of the West Indies. Roughly, whites and mixed form about 40 per cent each, blacks 20 per cent.<sup>156</sup>

Caymanians possessed a hereditary link back to Britain, a connection visibly reinforced by their lighter physical complexion compared to that of other West Indians. Seen as 'noticeably fair', and possessing even 'strong traces of Scandinavian origin'<sup>157</sup>, the connection drawn between fairer skin colour and naval aptitude echoes nineteenth century martial race theory's preoccupation with Aryanism. Certain Indian groups were said to have retained "old Aryan stock" passed down from the fair-skinned peoples of central Asia who conquered northern India in ancient times. It was assumed that the descendants of those Aryan invaders, most notably Punjabis and Dogras, thus inherited their 'superior military capabilities'<sup>158</sup>. In a similar manner, seafaring ability was believed here to have been passed down from Britain to Cayman.

Amongst the Caymanian sailors, any racial delineation was overridden by a collective self-assurance in their own maritime abilities. This underpinned their shared sense of Caymanian identity, and bound them together as a distinct ethnic group judged primarily on their professional qualities, not their skin colour; as one recruit, James Robinson, put it: 'The Cayman Islands seamen was recommended as the best seamen in the world... it was no difference between white and black'<sup>159</sup>.

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<sup>156</sup> Ibid., pp.34-5.

<sup>157</sup> Douglas, 'The Cayman Islands', p.127.

<sup>158</sup> Thomas Metcalf, *Imperial Connections: India in the Indian Ocean Arena, 1860-1920* (London, 2007), p.72.

<sup>159</sup> CINA, Interview with James Robinson, conducted by Leonard Bodden, 11 June 1993, tape 2, side A, transcript p.10.

Although within a colonial naval force such as the TRNVR, Caymanians garnered more respect than their West Indian colonial colleagues, they were still viewed as inferior to regular British sailors. Harry McCoy served aboard HMS *Nigeria* for a time as the sole Caymanian in a Royal Navy crew of over seven hundred. There he had to overcome a degree of discrimination, though he did not consider it racial in nature:

There was, has always been, you know, a little bit of prejudice among English people and up to this day they always saw themselves superior to the Colonials... of whatever colour... you had to accept that, you see. But after you worked along with them and they saw that you were equal to them in every respect... I had no problems.<sup>160</sup>

Whereas Harry McCoy was able to work to overcome any negative preconceptions and prove himself before judging eyes, others were not given that same opportunity within the TRNVR. Preference for Caymanians acted to disbar other ethnic groups from certain assignments and occupations within the force. Individuals came to be judged not on their own merit but by their ethnicity, and the relative maritime skill supposedly attributed to that. In one instance, TRNVR personnel were assigned to relieve the British crew of HMS *Corsair*. All were Caymanian with the exception of one Barbadian, prompting the Captain to summarily "send him back" having specifically requested an "all Cayman crew"<sup>161</sup>. Such prejudices led to Caymanians gaining a monopoly in the seamen branches, where their seafaring skills could be put to most effective use:

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<sup>160</sup> CINA, Interview with Harry McCoy, conducted by Heather McLoughlin, 3 July 1991, tape 2, side B, transcript pp.33-4.

<sup>161</sup> Interview with T. Ewart Ebanks (1), p.41.

Most of those boats you could look for the majority of the seamen, the deck men, would be Caymanians... The vast majority of the deck department would be Caymanians, a few in the engine room, few in the galley or the steward department, but the actual working sailors the most was Caymanians.<sup>162</sup>

One branch's overwhelming dependence on a single ethnic group created logistical problems when it came to managing leave, causing homesickness, discontent and disillusionment amongst the men:

Every time, one of us mentioned the word vacation, the answer was that we could not be spared since ninety-six per cent of the warships were manned by Cayman Naval Seamen... at the time it appeared as if we had become the forgotten men of the Navy.<sup>163</sup>

It took an impromptu inspection by the local admiral for this to be addressed, and all the Caymanian volunteers were subsequently sent home on leave in three staggered batches, but this was the only time most got to return to the Caymans in over four years in the TRNVR<sup>164</sup>.

On one ship, preconceptions about the Caymanian seamen led to the group as a whole receiving preferential treatment:

All the deck crew were Caymanians... The captain was so pleased with our performance that... he called us all up, all the Caymanians... and

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<sup>162</sup> Interview with Carley Ebanks, p.19.

<sup>163</sup> McLaughlin, *The Forgotten Men of the Navy*, p.87.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, p.88.

rated us Able-bodied Seamen from the day we had in our required time...

that's the only time I have heard about it being done.<sup>165</sup>

Individual merit, normally the key factor in determining promotion, was here subsumed by group identity. This may have been fostered by the fact that up to sixty-eight of the recruits shared the same characteristically Caymanian surname:

"STEP FORWARD Ebanks," yelled the drill instructor, irate at a mistake by one of his squad of recruits. His temper rose when the whole squad stepped forward.

"I only said for Ebanks to step forward, not everyone," he shouted.

"We're all Ebanks," came the chorus from the men in reply.<sup>166</sup>

As a consequence, the group was further de-individualised by British officers, who from then on referred to each Ebanks as a number, 'starting with 1 and ending with 68'<sup>167</sup>.

Ethnic categorisation inevitably fostered stereotypes, even though it may have been a seemingly positive one of Caymanian maritime aptitude. Conversely though, this led to negative stereotypes being developed of other groups within the force, fostering divisions. W. Hewitt Rivers describes his impression of the unprofessional attitudes of the Trinidadian servicemen he served alongside:

We used to have Trinidadians and different people mixed up in the watchman job... every Trinidadian you had they didn't stay in the job very

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<sup>165</sup> CINA, Interview with Clive Glidden (2), conducted by Heather McLoughlin, 6 June 1996, tape 2, side A, transcript p.10.

<sup>166</sup> CINA, 'When 40 Ebanks went to war', *The Northwester* (November, 1972), pp.46-7.

<sup>167</sup> Sir Vassel Johnson, *As I See It: How Cayman Became a Leading Financial Centre* (Sussex, 2001), pp.50-51.

long. They went off and go home... they would catch them up and throw them in jail for going away... sometimes I had to stay on duty for nine days by myself.<sup>168</sup>

## **Discontent and Protest**

Caymanians had more negative impressions of Trinidad, conveyed in letters home:

It was an anxious [time], we were all upset... my brother was upset, he wanted to come home, but they wouldn't... he wasn't allowed to come home, you know, he had to stay there. And every letter that we got from him was a crying time, because he was very upset about being there... He wanted to go, but after a lot of them got up there, they found things that they didn't like, you know.<sup>169</sup>

Norman Rudolph McLoughlin was another who volunteered under an apparent misconception cultivated by the colonial authorities:

The first group left for Trinidad in early May and arrived there within eight to ten days. Promising reports were sent back that made the rest of us very eager to join them. I regret to say that after I arrived in Trinidad, I

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<sup>168</sup> CINA, Interview with W. Hewitt Rivers, conducted by Arthurlyn Pedley, 24 June 1991, transcript p.16.

<sup>169</sup> CINA, Interview with Edith Ebanks (nee Orrett), conducted by Tricia Bodden, 19 March 2003, transcript p.15.

discovered some of those promising reports to be false, and why they were sent back to Cayman was never explained to me.<sup>170</sup>

Upon their arrival at the TRNVR base in Staubles Bay, the Caymanians were faced with a foreign environment, poor facilities, professional neglect, and lack of proper uniform and medical care, causing many to fall ill; yet for some, such as McLoughlin, this failed to diminish his imperial patriotic determination to fight:

It was a 'real dump and mud hole'. When it rained, the mud slid down from the hills, coming right across the highway on to the base and out to sea. It was common to be walking through six to eight inches of mud and water over most of the base... We were still wearing our own clothes, shoes, and socks, which were wet most of the time. As a result of this exposure, most of us came down with an awful flu or even pneumonia and lay sick in our bunks for days. The medical service was terrible, consisting of one old doctor from St. Lucia. He did not appear to be qualified to take care of the situation, nor did he care a damn about us... I felt so proud to fight for my King and Country, that come hell or high tide, I was determined to stick it out.<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>170</sup> McLoughlin, *The Forgotten Men of the Navy*, prelude.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, p.4.



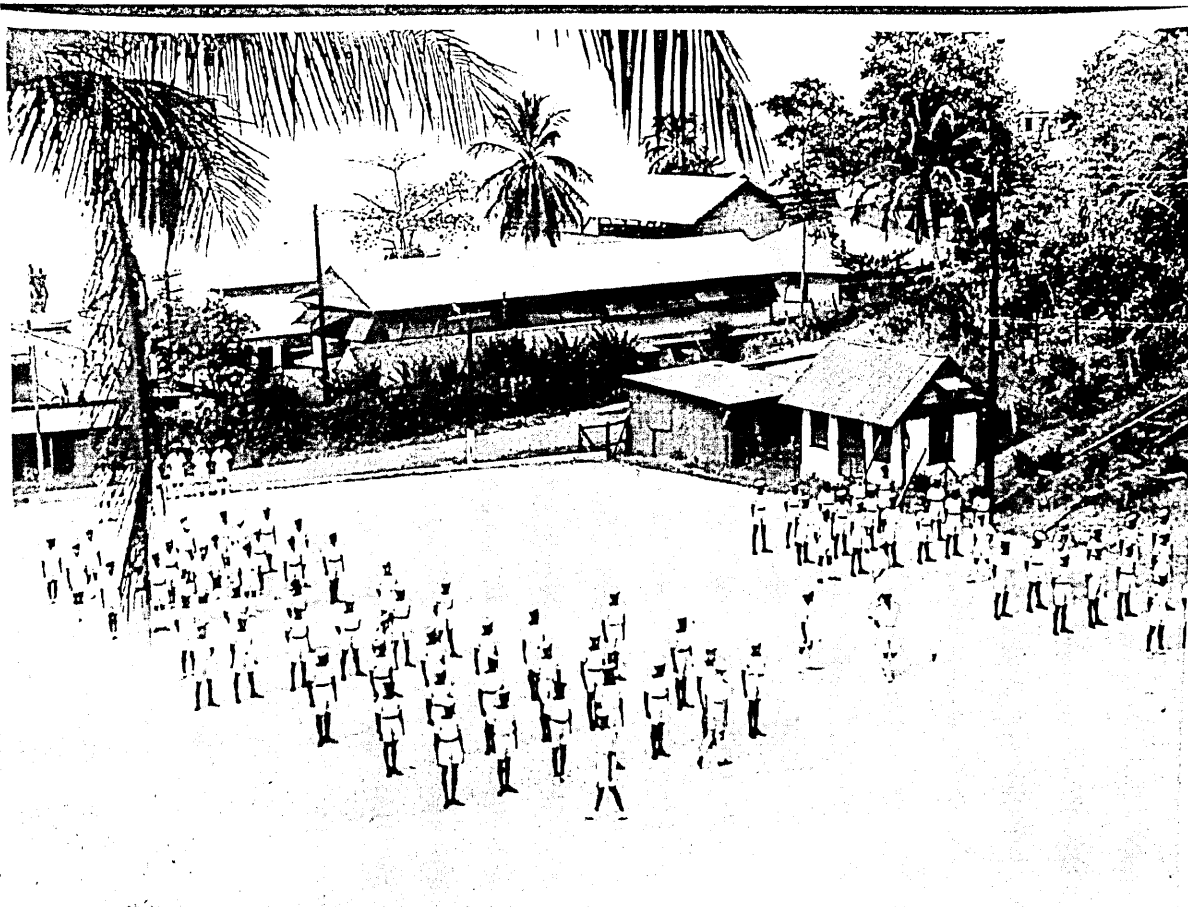


Image 1. The TRNVR on parade at its headquarters in Staubles Bay, Trinidad, 1943  
[Source: TNA, ADM 1/13014, 'Publicity in UK for Colonial Naval Forces']

The health of the Caymanians was not helped by the standard of food they received, another cause for discontent. Here, cultural insularity meant that they were unfamiliar with foreign tastes and cooking methods they encountered in the multi-cultural force, with consequences physically, economically, and for morale:

The food was awful and poorly cooked by the Trinidadian cooks. They either could not cook our Caymanian type of food or were simply poor cooks. There was plenty of food, but it was badly prepared and most of us could not eat it... [I] ate very little of the food prepared in the galley, and started buying biscuits, chocolates, soft drinks, etc. from the canteen. Of

course, having very little money to spare, many nights I found myself going hungry.<sup>172</sup>

Such complaints did not garner popular sympathy, however, and served to ostracise the Caymanians from the local populace. The successful German U-boat campaign waged in the Caribbean from February 1942 took its toll on island shipping, causing extreme food shortages amongst civilians. One fifth of all merchant ships in the Caribbean were lost to submarine action, 385 in 1942 alone<sup>173</sup>. As those responsible for the safety of the convoys, despite the difficulties they worked under with the poor equipment afforded them, naval personnel became obvious targets for civilian blame, especially as from the outside they appeared to be sheltered from civilians' sufferings.<sup>174</sup>

Local resentment towards the Caymanians sailors meant that 'in going ashore you had to go in gangs, we wasn't allowed to go alone, because some time you'd meet some of them that want to fight you.'<sup>175</sup> The Office of Naval Intelligence reported that by late 1942, there was 'hooliganism in Trinidad – a wave of disorder and petty crime... directed at North Americans, British and other white persons'.<sup>176</sup> Yet Caymanians were also 'othered' in this way by the lighter colour of their skin, as they had been by naval recruiters. With very little crime back home, the deeply religious Caymanians were shocked by the relative vice they witnessed on Trinidad:

Trinidad was a wicked place, a lot of killing and shooting of people and the like used to go on... when you go to dance in the night, you coming back

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<sup>172</sup> Ibid., pp.5-6.

<sup>173</sup> Gaylord Kelshall, *The U-Boat War In the Caribbean* (Annapolis, 1988), pp.foreward-1.

<sup>174</sup> Interview with Roosevelt Rankine (2), p.15.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid., p.8.

<sup>176</sup> Quoted in Annette Palmer, 'The United States and the Commonwealth Caribbean, 1940-45', Ph.D. thesis (Fordham University, 1979), p.244.

home, you can run over, you can walk over several dead man on the road.<sup>177</sup>

For some of the volunteers thrust into these transnational encounters, local abuse, ignorance and prejudice overrode their initial motivations for enlisting, spurring them to try to leave the force and return to the Cayman Islands:

After I stop the turtle business, I went to the war... and stayed there four years and six months... More went, but they got 'fraid and come back home... It was bad business; it was mean set-up... the people there in Trinidad thought that we had come from nowhere.<sup>178</sup>

Being transnational volunteers, however, they were stranded on an island thousands of miles away from their home, without the means themselves to return, and completely dependent upon the will of the British authorities whom many saw as accountable for their sufferings. Those men unable to cope faked illness in the hope they would be sent back, as Rankine testifies: 'so many performed, 'formed like they were sick... and let them send them home.'<sup>179</sup> Rivers also witnessed this charade, but a stronger sense of patriotic duty drove him to stay:

The impression that I had first, it was so cold that I wouldn't want to relive that again... the majority of boys that came back from Cayman, they just played sick and they didn't want to stay there... but I decided that if I was able to do something for... I would have to say for my country, I would stay,

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<sup>177</sup> CINA, Interview with Armenthea Watler (2), conducted by Elizabeth Ebanks, 19 August 1991, transcript p.25.

<sup>178</sup> Interview with James Robinson, pp.8-9.

<sup>179</sup> Interview with Roosevelt Rankine (2), p.19.

and I stayed all the time. It was four years and eight months that I was there.<sup>180</sup>

Civilian violence and hostility was not restricted to Trinidad, but was encountered during port visits to other islands too, such as in Kingston, Jamaica, otherwise known as the 'mother colony' of the Cayman Islands dependency. Despite this status, local economic problems meant that Jamaicans simmered with resentment over the relatively 'high' naval wages their 'junior' colonials were perceived as receiving:

It was rugged then. Went shore there and they pelt the boys with bricks and all those kind of things... you know seaman meets it hard most of them places... any part you go to, they feel that the seaman has plenty of money.<sup>181</sup>

Such wartime military-civil tensions might have fostered a greater sense of in-group unity and esprit de corps amongst the multicultural TRNVR members, with the civilian population defined as its out-group<sup>182</sup>. The reason it did not in this context perhaps is because naval service identity was competing with a much stronger in-group identity, that of ethnicity, which united Trinidadians within the force and the island more broadly and overlapped military-civil boundaries. Ethnic identity superseded service unity in this instance. Thus transnational identities were both strengthened and challenged by wartime service. The issue of food continued to act as a source of contention and division within the TRNVR, evincing itself when roles

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<sup>180</sup> Interview with W. Hewitt Rivers, pp.12-13.

<sup>181</sup> Interview with Roosevelt Rankine (2), p.6.

<sup>182</sup> Henri Tajfel and John C. Turner, 'The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behavior' in S. Worchel &

W. Austin (eds.), *Psychology of Intergroup Relations* (Chicago, 1986), pp.7-24.

were inverted, with Caymanians taking on the cooking duties and Trinidadians the disgruntled consumers. In its most extreme case, this resulted in violent abuse. Lloyd Seymore was in the camp cooking breakfast when a Trinidadian rating asked him for fish. After being told fish was not on the menu, the Trinidadian disappeared and came back with a wooden 'beladen pin', which he 'muntled' Seymore over the head with.<sup>183</sup> After a month in hospital, Seymore was discharged, only to be re-admitted after experiencing haemorrhaging through the nose. He was put in the condemned ward, number eleven, where he developed a big abscess in his nostrils and was not cleaned or fed.<sup>184</sup> It took the intervention of Petty Officer McLoughlin, one of the senior Caymanians, before Seymore was moved, received food, and began to make a recovery, finally being honourably discharged from the force. Not all the Caymanians were as 'lucky' as Seymore, however:

We learned that one of our Cayman boys had died... Before we could get over the shock of Johnson's death, we were told that another person had passed away a few weeks before... By now, I had become very angry and had changed from the young, quiet, loyal man who had left Grand Cayman on the 29<sup>th</sup> of July, and had turned into a hardened, tough man who was ready to join the others in protest... regardless of the consequences.<sup>185</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> A 'beladen' or 'belaying' pin is used for securing belaying rope. 'Muntled' means he clubbed him – the muntle is a heavy hand-carved wooden club used primarily for killing/stunning shark and other large fish. 'Licked' means hit. Interview Armenthea Watler (2), p.24.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid., p.24.

<sup>185</sup> McLoughlin, *The Forgotten Men of the Navy*, p.8.

Within an hour the men had fallen in on the quarter deck and demanded to see Commander Wilkinson, the base Commanding Officer, from whom they requested their discharge from the TRNVR, and made the following demands:

1. Better medical service.
2. Replace the cots in the barracks with proper double bunk beds.
3. Pitch the base to prevent any mud holes or water from settling.
4. Improve the cooking system in the galley.
5. Change the behaviour of The First Lieutenant towards us which included screaming and threatening us and passing sarcastic remarks.<sup>186</sup>

Of these, item 1 'was the principal reason why we were so angry and disappointed in the Navy. We felt that our two country service men died from the lack of proper medical aid'<sup>187</sup>. Again, the in-group pull of ethnicity proved stronger than the service. This was an exclusively Caymanian protest, with the other islanders within the TRNVR not participating, despite the general nature of some of the grievances. Although discontent ran deep and stretched back to their initial arrival, it took strength in numbers later on and the death of two of their own, to galvanise the Caymanian men into action, and overcome the social pressure of the larger Trinidadian group who occupied a dominant position within the force because of their local status:

When the second and third batches of volunteers [from Cayman] arrived on the base, there already were quite a number of Trinidadians and even some from the other islands in addition to the first batch from The Cayman

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<sup>186</sup> Ibid., p.13.

<sup>187</sup> Idem.

Islands. They [the first batch] all must have been scared to fight for better conditions on the base. I can understand their reluctance in protesting, since they might have been outnumbered by Trinidadians, and those from the other islands who appeared not to worry about anything; perhaps they might have been accustomed to that way of life.<sup>188</sup>

Despite this external expression of Caymanian solidarity, members found themselves internally conflicted between their personal desires and the pressure of group allegiance. It also raised questions regarding the attitudes of the British authorities:

I endured a restless night dreaming about the Navy and what the future held in store for me. Although I was still standing firm with the others about going home, I honestly did not want to. I was hoping that most of them would change their minds providing that the Commander would make good on his promises... there was one important question that was never asked: 'is it true the British treated us so subordinately because they were still practising their colonial prejudice against all of us? If not, why did two of our men have to die before we were treated better?'<sup>189</sup>

In a matter of days, most of the complaints were being taken care of, and the situation on the base began to improve slowly. Yet, it could not displace the negative impression that had been conveyed of the British:

I had spoken to an Irishman in the Navy who told me not to expect too much improvement on the base. Because we were all colonials, The

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<sup>188</sup> Ibid., p.16.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid., p.15.

British seemed to believe that we were inferior to them. He went on to say that even though he was an Irishman, he was not treated any better, and would have never volunteered to join were it not for the fact that he was about to be drafted anyway and did not want to end up in the army.<sup>190</sup>

Anti-imperial sentiment was fermented here by the transnational encounters that war facilitated, and colonial volunteers like Clive Glidden were no longer prepared to submit unquestioningly to their imperial 'masters':

The Commander, he says, "You know what you call a forced man?" I say, "No, I don't think I do." He says, "Well, in the old days, you were told what to do." I say, "I think those days are past." So he never gave me no hard time.<sup>191</sup>

The war had prompted a growing realisation amongst Caymanians that 'the British needed us more than we needed them'<sup>192</sup>.

Whereas Harry McCoy had experienced a degree of colonial prejudice whilst serving aboard HMS *Nigeria*, it was in isolation. The deaths of Uline Eden and Seaman Johnson brought home that sense of inferiority to the rest of the group, an act of paternal betrayal they would not forget:

Those two naval men died in vain. I am still so bitter against the British naval authorities over their deaths. When we joined the Navy in July, 1941, we discovered that the medical standard for colonials was inferior compared the standard of medical care for the British naval men. For

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<sup>190</sup> Idem.

<sup>191</sup> Interview with Clive Glidden (2), p.3.

<sup>192</sup> McLaughlin, *The Forgotten Men of the Navy*, p.16.



instance, we, the colonials, were given one old local doctor to take care of us, while the British naval men at Royal Navy Camp had excellent qualified doctors to take care of them.<sup>193</sup>

In the end, as 'most of our demands had been met, we were satisfied to stay. A small rebellious group held out however, and were eventually sent back home.'<sup>194</sup> Even though it was felt that the 'Mother Country' had broken her commitment to them, the majority of Caymanians refused to break theirs, remaining loyal and continuing to fight for Britain until the end of the war:

There is no question in my mind that we were *The Forgotten Men of the Navy*. Speaking for myself, I am proud that I volunteered to go and fight for my Country, and if I were young enough and my services were required, I would not hesitate to do so again.<sup>195</sup>

This imperial patriotism was preserved by the British by appealing directly to the Caymanians' sense of maritime worth, integral to conceptions of their self-identity:

Although we, the Cayman naval men, at times might have been mistreated or had to do more than our fair share, in the end, the top military brass bestowed a lot of praise on us and openly admitted that we were the cream of the naval crop.<sup>196</sup>

Rather than feeling aggrieved at Caymanians having had to 'do more than our fair share', this was turned into a badge of honour to reflect their indispensability. In this way, the British were able to preserve Caymanian loyalty by fostering their sense of cultural pride and seafaring superiority over the other West Indian sailors in the

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<sup>193</sup> Ibid., p.119.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid., p.16.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid., p.120.

<sup>196</sup> Idem.

TRNVR:

We had good reputation up there, and the Commander... when we were coming home, he gived [sic] a speech, he say... "Unna Caymanians was the pride of the Navy."<sup>197</sup>

## Identity and Historical Memory

Several oral historical accounts express similar assertions that Caymanians represented the 'best seamen in the world', yet T. Ewart Ebanks, for one, admits 'I don't know how they knew it.'<sup>198</sup> Though naval service helped them gain post-war employment with international shipping companies, the islands' comparative isolation from the rest of the world provided limited opportunity to draw such conclusions beforehand. As a Caymanian cultural identifier, it has gained retrospective significance in emphasising the islands' wartime contribution, a historical distortion which has become engrained through collective memory. Though Caymanian maritime heritage is indisputable, the conception of them as the 'best seamen in the world' was one which was initially cultivated by colonial authorities to serve imperial and naval ends.

Allen Wolsey Cardinall, Commissioner of the Cayman Islands from 1934 to 1941, was accredited with drawing British attention to the colony's seamen as potential recruits for the Navy<sup>199</sup>. Described as an 'efficient District Commissioner',

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<sup>197</sup> Interview with T. Ewart Ebanks (1), p.41.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid., p.33.

<sup>199</sup> CINA, Interview with Harold Banks, Carley Ebanks and Harvey Ebanks, conducted by Liz Scolefield, 18 May 1996, transcript p.20.

who 'takes a great interest in the Native customs and habits', he implemented several measures to improve the social and economic condition of "the islands that time forgot"<sup>200</sup>. Many of these drew on Cayman's maritime strengths, with consequences for future naval recruitment. In January 1935, Cardinall founded the first annual Cayman Islands sailing Regatta, which drew participants from across the Caribbean and the United States. He hoped to foster a greater sense of Caymanian unity by 'bringing the islands and islanders together in friendly competition'<sup>201</sup>. This coincided with the opening of the George Town radio station on 23 November 1935, where messages were exchanged with Australia, Ceylon, South Africa, Canada, the Falkland Islands, as well as Britain and most of the other West Indian colonies<sup>202</sup>, instilling Caymanians with a greater sense of belonging to the imperial family. This world-view instilled in the younger members of the population held sway a few years later when, with a greater appreciation of the global nature of the conflict, volunteering to serve in the TRNVR offered the rare chance to escape the quiet life of the islands and seek adventure overseas:

I don't think anyone really got scared. In fact I know I was glad of it. As a youngster you know. I thought you know, that it was an opportunity to get out and get in some action, and see the world, and I think that this was the feeling of the young people.<sup>203</sup>

Each regatta would be honoured by a visiting Royal Navy warship, with two sailors from the vessel accompanying each schooner participating in the race, 'largely to put

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<sup>200</sup> Craton, *Founded Upon the Seas*, p.280, p.253.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*, p.281.

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*, p.286.

<sup>203</sup> CINA, Interview with Harry McCoy, conducted by Heather McLoughlin, 3 July 1991, tape 2, side A, transcript p.6.

a bit of prestige into the regatta's sporting affairs<sup>204</sup>. The Admiralty was drawn by the recruitment possibilities such association offered, considering that 'as a potential source of seamen for the Auxiliary Patrol Service, these ready made sailors seem to justify every encouragement<sup>205</sup>. Subsequent visits reaffirmed the opinion that 'the Cayman Islanders... would make fine material on which to draw in time of war, in the same way as the Newfoundland fishermen were in the last war<sup>206</sup>. The Admiralty acted on this by loaning a cup for the race winners, as 'the presentation of such a prize would stimulate interest in the Royal Navy that might be invaluable in the event of hostilities<sup>207</sup>. Such efforts succeeded in raising enthusiasm for the Royal Navy on Cayman, and sentimental ties were formed between local inhabitants and visiting warships. One example was the cruiser, HMS *Orion*, which earned local affection for her role in retrieving the popular Caymanian schooner *Goldfield* after a storm in September 1937<sup>208</sup>, and was later involved in the hunt for the German pocket-battleship *Graf Spee*:

This created much interest in Cayman.... Caymanians enjoyed listening to the battle in South America, not only because of knowing the *Orion* when she attended Cayman's 1938 regatta but also because we had great faith in the mother country's naval fleet, the most formidable in the world.<sup>209</sup>

Such visits helped inculcate Caymanians with a belief in British power, both imperial and naval, a greater sense of patriotic pride, and heightened the prestige of the

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<sup>204</sup> Johnson, *As I See It*, p.60.

<sup>205</sup> TNA, ADM 1/9749, 'From Commanding Officer, H.M.S. "DRAGON" at Minatitlan, To The Commander-in-Chief, America and West Indies', 2 February 1937.

<sup>206</sup> TNA, ADM 1/9749, 'H.M.S. "Dundee's" No.2/37', 28 February 1938.

<sup>207</sup> TNA, ADM 1/9749, 'Cayman Islands Regatta - Proposed Presentation of a Cup', 4 May 1937.

<sup>208</sup> Smith, *The Maritime Heritage of the Cayman Islands*, p.144.

<sup>209</sup> Johnson, *As I See It*, p.60.

Royal Navy, all of which increased the appeal of naval service when the opportunity to volunteer presented itself:

It had been grounded in us that, you know, 'Britannia ruled the waves', and Britons never shall be slaves'. Well this extended all over the Empire; you know we just felt that Britain was invincible.<sup>210</sup>

One way this patriotic belief in Britain and the Royal Navy had been 'grounded' in young Caymanians was through the 'Trafalgar Day' school essay competition, instigated by Cardinall in 1935. Echoing Harry McCoy's reference to 'Rule Britannia', Linda Borden eulogised that 'when we study the lives of such men as Lord Nelson, we are proud to know that we form a part of the British Empire, and with the spirit of Nelson we can truly sing: "Britons never shall be slaves"'. In his essay entitled 'Supremacy of the Seas', Glendower McLoughlin expressed that 'we should all aspire to have the same feeling towards our Country as Nelson had, and have as our watchword Nelson's great and noble words "England expects every man to do his duty"'. 'Today Trafalgar seems to say we are a unit of the greatest nation on Earth, therefore we should make ourselves worthy of the greatest and best', so argued David McLaughlin. Another, Cecil Wood, wrote that '[Nelson] has left us his mantle of inspiration which is inspiring thousands of youths of the British Empire today'<sup>211</sup>. That 'mantle' would then be carried by those Caymanians in the TRNVR.

To organise the regatta, Cardinall created the Cayman Islands Yacht and Sailing Club, whose members numbered 134 by 1937. The Commissioner also helped form two troops of Sea Scouts in George Town and West Bay, which in 1937

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<sup>210</sup> Interview with Harry McCoy, tape 2, side A, p.7.

<sup>211</sup> CINA, 'Trafalgar Day', Central Registry File 706/35, 5 October 1935.

totalled eighty-two boys, with another fifty-nine more in two cub packs<sup>212</sup>. As in Trinidad, these organisations provided a valuable potential pool of organised and disciplined recruits for the TRNVR come wartime<sup>213</sup>, such as Harry McCoy:

I was there [in the Home Guard] for nineteen months... the day I took off my uniform, I left to join the Navy... that had been my life's ambition as a boy... I was a Sea Scout, and being a Caymanian, I already had the salt water in my blood... so I volunteered when the opportunity came.<sup>214</sup>

When Royal Navy warships would visit the islands during the regatta, the Sea Scouts would be invited aboard them, thus exposing them first-hand to British naval culture. Together they helped lay vital foundations for post-war employment in an environment which traditionally provided limited education and opportunity:

Between [the Sea Scouts] and the TRNVR, turned out some of our best sailors, best seamen. Well, some of them that weren't Scouts had the sea in their blood anyway... with the limited education, basic education, that they had... the experience of those four years in Trinidad among those who were there, and went to sea afterwards, was amazing.<sup>215</sup>

Here the colonial authorities emphasised their own active role in the 'production' of Caymanian seamen, accrediting their measures as having 'turned out' some of the best. Furthermore, though 'some... had the sea in their blood anyway', it was clearly not universal, and even those who did required colonial assistance to develop their skills so as to make a positive contribution to Cayman society. Paternal British

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<sup>212</sup> Craton, *Founded Upon the Seas*, p.281.

<sup>213</sup> CINA, Interview with Ernest Panton, conducted by Iva Johnson-Good and Roger Good, 1979-80, transcript p.2.

<sup>214</sup> Interview with Harry McCoy, tape 2, side A, p.10.

<sup>215</sup> Interview with Ernest Panton, p.5.

leadership was thus highlighted as a key actor in this discourse of development, carrying on the tradition of the imperial civilising mission. Again, though Caymanians may have been viewed and treated in a more positive manner than other West Indians, they were still considered an imperial infant to Britain, requiring the motherland's guidance in order to grow and develop.

Caymanian society was highly religious, dominated by the Presbyterian Church, and the intrinsic connection drawn between religious and maritime tradition on the islands is engrained in Cayman's motto taken from Psalm 24: "He hath founded it upon the seas."<sup>216</sup> Just as the paternalism of the civilising mission prevailed, so religion continued to act as its conduit. The colonial authorities were conscious of the powerful influence that religion had over the local population. When they put out the call to arms, they did so in the setting of the Presbyterian Church, thus instilling their message with a religious symbolism that subconsciously appealed to potential recruits through that sacred setting, and framing the struggle against Hitler as a holy and righteous war in which God was on Britain's side:

It was difficult to leave home, but I had a mind to serve because as Commissioner Cardinall said in his speech at the Presbyterian Church in George Town, war was like a dark cloud hanging over the world and Hitler had to be stopped. I wanted to play my part too.<sup>217</sup>

Nazi racism was framed as being anti-Christian, and acted as a moral inducement to serve as well as a legitimising contrast to Britain's 'tolerant' authority:

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<sup>216</sup> Craton, *Founded Upon the Seas*, p.406.

<sup>217</sup> Conray Forbes, 'An Experience of War', *Newstar*, 52 (1995), p.15.

Intolerant authority is the essence of Nazism and has provided the most dangerous menace to Christianity and civilisation that the World has yet seen... the British, as a race, the most tolerant of men. Not only do we believe in toleration for ourselves but also for others. We are prepared to fight for that and, in fact, it is that for which we are fighting.<sup>218</sup>

This verged on crusading zealotry, with the prospect of killing another human being excused on account of the fact that 'they were fighting an enemy, an infidel, who didn't share the same beliefs that they shared, that didn't share the same notion of God that they had'. They saw it as their 'religious duty, as well as a civil, civic, and national duty' to 'volunteer to fight, and if necessary, to make the ultimate sacrifice, to lose their lives themselves, or in the process, to kill the persons who they deemed their enemy'.<sup>219</sup> Several church services were held for the islands' volunteers, both before and after their departure, which itself helped to unite the islands. Even in the Caymans, where racial divisions were less stark, 'in the "old days" the "coloured people" sat on one side of the church', but 'this was changed during the war years when many Caymanian men travelled to serve in the TRNVR'<sup>220</sup>. This helped strengthen Caymanian group identity beyond race, with all islanders uniting in prayer for the safe return of their men. Each batch of recruits that set sail for Trinidad did so under the charge of Reverend George Hicks, a veteran from the First World War and the Presbyterian Minister for Grand Cayman<sup>221</sup>, as if shepherded into battle under the Lord's divine protection. In the words of Bertram Ebanks: 'I have taken Christ as my

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<sup>218</sup> Editorial, 'Toleration', *The Goshawk*, 1, No. 7 (July 1941), p.552.

<sup>219</sup> Roy Bodden, local historian and chairman of University College Cayman Islands, *Path to Life: Honouring the Cayman Islands Veterans*, documentary broadcast from George Town, 8 November 2009.

<sup>220</sup> Sybil McLoughlin, *Cayman Net News*, 3 March 2006.

<sup>221</sup> CINA, XH/117/5, Government Notice 73/41, 2 June 1941.



shield and defender so I've nothing to dread, and I'm willing to do anything I can to help bring an end to this great conflict'<sup>222</sup>.

Prior to the Second World War, Caymanian seamen were not conscious of their relative standing in the world; it was something they had acquired by the time they returned to the Cayman Islands at the end of the war. It has since become a central facet of Caymanian identity, key to the islands' post-war economic growth, and consequently is an ideal which has been retrospectively elevated through historical memory to become engrained in the nation's tradition. This is not to say that the Caymanian 'call of the sea' was purely a colonial construction. As with martial race theory, this identity is anchored in a degree of empirical reality, but over time it became layered. The natural environment of the Cayman Islands, its resources, its settlers, and the local economy that developed from these, meant that nautical skills and traditions inevitably evolved amongst its people. Certainly seafaring ability made them attractive as recruits for the Navy, but it did not in itself differentiate them from many other peoples who hailed from nautical backgrounds. It was during Commissioner Cardinal's tenure that Caymanian maritime heritage was institutionalised in the spirit of social and economic development and through 'invented traditions'<sup>223</sup> such as the regatta, but with an ulterior aim of fostering imperial spirit and a belief in British naval invincibility that aided volunteerism during war. He was a man preoccupied with his own legacy and establishing a position for himself in the island's folklore 'so that when I leave you will remember me always'.<sup>224</sup> This he achieved by eulogising Caymanian maritime worth to the Navy and

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<sup>222</sup> CINA, XH/117/5, Letter from Bertram Ebanks to Acting Commissioner, 6 July 1941.

<sup>223</sup> Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, 1983).

<sup>224</sup> Neville Williams, *A History of the Cayman Islands* (Grand Cayman, 1970), p.77.

cultivating a collective pride in this identity, though his sentiments have consequently gained disproportionate weight in the popular memory of Caymanian naval veterans.

Race was a key factor in the Navy's initial preference for Caymanians, being lighter in complexion compared to other West Indians. The influence of martial race theory evinced itself in this link with 'Aryanism', and the use of anthropology to legitimise racial discrimination and preferential selection within the force, based on pseudo-scientific deductions regarding intelligence and fitness. Transnational encounters with the British and other West Indians strengthened Caymanian identity, though at the expense of force cohesion, and left them isolated when problems arose. Though Caymanians considered themselves victims of colonial as opposed to racial prejudice, this imperial subordination within the naval chain of command prompted protest, and for some eroded their original motivations to fight. To help preserve patriotic loyalty for the majority to continue fighting, like Cardinall, British officers, thus appealed to Caymanian ethnic pride by lauding their maritime worth, and instilling in them the belief that they were 'the best seamen in the world'.

## Part Two: Trinidad

### The American 'Invasion'

On 2 September 1940 the Destroyers for Bases agreement was signed, transferring 50 antiquated destroyers from the United States in exchange for land rights on several British West Indian territories for the construction of military bases. There was no consultation with the islanders over the agreement, the lease of which ran for 99 years. In Trinidad, the main US Naval base was to be built at Chaguaramas, adjoining the TRNVR's headquarters. As with the TRNVR's formation, the strategic merits were overshadowed by the political implications, with the political ruling class believing that the bases were "bulwarks of capitalism, miraculously at hand to help them in strangling at the birth, any post-war upsurings of labour" and would 'stand as "bastions against the infiltration of subversive doctrines" which they had suspected of being at the core of the upheavals in the thirties'.<sup>225</sup> Though in Trinidad, 'prominent leaders of various sections of the community' unanimously welcomed the announcement, though there was underlying feeling that "while we welcome the greater affinity and understanding between the United States and Britain, we should certainly not wish to be alienated from British sovereignty":

"There is nobody that would more strongly oppose any scheme having as its object either the question of converting the West Indies into a Canadian

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<sup>225</sup> "'Caribbean Bastions' written by a native Trinidadian in July-August 1941, of European descent who wishes to remain anonymous", Appendix "O" to Anglo-American Caribbean Commission, "Social and Political Forces", p.536, quoted in Annette Catherine Palmer, 'The United States and the Commonwealth Caribbean, 1940-45', Ph.D. thesis (Fordham University, 1979), pp.76-7.

Province or bringing about American annexation, but at the same time there is no one but sees the practicability and the sound statesmanlike reasons, in peace or war, for any scheme which will place the Atlantic under the control agreed upon between the English speaking democracies."<sup>226</sup>

Sir Lennox O'Reilly commented that "everyone welcomes the agreement that has been reached between the two Anglo-Saxon speaking nations", while the Honourable T.M. Kelshall, Unofficial Member of the Legislative Council, added:

"The agreement must command the wholehearted approval of every sensible person in this community and the entire freedom-loving world. I see no two sides to it. Britain and America coming together in this way are defending not only themselves but also civilisation."<sup>227</sup>

Similar language was espoused by Major D.A. Trafford of the U.S. Marine Corps a year later, at the inaugural raising of the 'Stars and Stripes' at the new base when he reassured: "We come as friends, as the bond of common democracy links us in a struggle against the enemies of freedom and justice the world over."<sup>228</sup> The rhetoric expressed from both sides bears the prevailing hallmarks of nineteenth-century Anglo-Saxonism, which emphasised the superiority of the British and American peoples and their civilisation based upon principles such as liberal democracy. Such ideology provided a moral justification for imperialism by teaching those values and 'elevating' the colonised peoples through paternalism.

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<sup>226</sup> Director of Geo. F. Huggins and Co., *The Trinidad Guardian*, 8 September 1940, p.13.

<sup>227</sup> *The Trinidad Guardian*, 8 September 1940, p.13.

<sup>228</sup> Box 2 Miscellaneous, Annex "C", 'Article on the first flag raising taken from the "Trinidad Guardian", 1 April 1941', p.217, Fitzroy Baptiste Thesis Materials, UWI, Trinidad and Tobago.

There was a realisation that the concept of Empire did not sit easily with the notion of fighting a war for freedom and democracy. The local press were enlisted to help combat the critics 'who say that we are waging a war in defence of imperialism. They speak as though our Imperialism were something which was gross, greedy and grabbing, as though it were a system of exploitation and oppression on the grand scale'<sup>229</sup>. The *Trinidad Guardian* ran a series of articles distinguishing between the 'Two Kinds of Imperialism', practiced by Britain and Germany. An article entitled 'Two Ideas of Empire' written by the historian and Liberal politician Ramsay Muir, defined this as '*Either* - The British conception of the equal partnership of free peoples. *Or* - The Nazi master-race theory where the dominant nation treats the others as slaves'<sup>230</sup>. Central to this distinction was the notion of 'trusteeship':

In saying that there are peoples in different parts of the world who are not yet ripe for self-government, we are not being guilty of any hypocrisy which cloaks other motives. We have the authority of the high-minded authors of the Covenant of the League of Nations to confirm that view... *There are territories which are inhabited by peoples not yet able to stand by themselves under the strenuous conditions of the modern world. The well-being of such peoples form a sacred trust of civilisation.*<sup>231</sup>

Thus, a war on behalf of civilisation was by its definition, a war to uphold the existing British imperial system, endorsed by international mandate. In contrast it was asserted that 'Nazi Germany is grossly unfit to take charge of peoples "not yet able to

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<sup>229</sup> *The Trinidad Guardian*, 23 June 1940, p.6.

<sup>230</sup> *The Trinidad Guardian*, 6 July 1940, p.6.

<sup>231</sup> *The Trinidad Guardian*, 23 June 1940, p.6.

stand by themselves under the strenuous conditions of the modern world", because they lacked the civilised qualities of the Anglo-Saxons:

The terrors of the prison camp make the blood of decent men run cold. If this is what Hitler and his Germans do to Aryan people, fellow-citizens of Europe, partners in the same civilisation of the West, what then would be the character of their rule over African, Asiatic or Polynesian people, if these were so unhappy as to fall into their clutches.<sup>232</sup>

Yet this assumption that the German treatment of Africans, Asiatics or Polynesians would naturally be worse than of Europeans itself indicates the British still perceived such peoples as inferior rather than equal partners, despite rhetoric professing otherwise. Similarly, stronger fears expressed privately regarding the potential erosion of British authority in Trinidad were joined by a moral concern over anticipated American attitudes towards the colony's black population:

There is a marked fear on the part of the West Indians that the establishment of the bases will affect British sovereignty in these ancient Colonies and derogate from their cherished British nationality... The plain fact is that the West Indians, in spite of their present poverty and their clear realisation of the financial benefits which will certainly accrue from the establishment of United States bases, are yet most apprehensive of the arrival of United States forces. This is due partly to a deep-seated loyalty and attachment to British traditions, and not less to the fear that

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<sup>232</sup> Idem.

American treatment of the Negro and coloured population will follow the lines notorious in the Southern United States.<sup>233</sup>

Despite the economic benefits the agreement promised the island, the prospect of large-scale construction work further problematised domestic recruitment for the TRNVR due to the higher wages the Americans were prepared to pay, prompting additional intakes to be sought from Britain's other West Indian territories.

The influx of over 20,000 American servicemen to an island population of approximately 510,000 inevitably had a profound effect on the political, economic and social dynamics of Trinidad. American motives were ideological, strategic and economic. It has been seen partly as an extension of the Monroe Doctrine and assertion of US primacy in the Americas. Protection of the strategically vital artery of the Panama Canal was of vital importance. The advent of oil-combustion-engine aircraft and submarines during the period 1913-1939 meant that offensive operations could now be carried out over longer distances, with greater rapidity and over a greater combat radius than before. This 'threatened to shrink considerably the degree of security that, until then, oceans such as the Atlantic and Pacific afforded to the United States'<sup>234</sup>. A far-advanced-base concept was first mooted by the famous naval theorist Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan between 1884 and his death in 1914, but it was the First World War which crystallised thought in that direction:

There is no other consideration so formidable and serious to an invading fleet as that of a securely-defended and well-equipped naval base

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<sup>233</sup> TNA, CAB 66/14, Item 82, 'War Cabinet: United States Activities in the West Indies and Other British Dependencies, Memorandum by the Secretary of State for the Colonies', 27 December 1940.

<sup>234</sup> Fitzroy Baptiste, 'United States-Caribbean Relations from World War II to the Present: The Social Nexus', in Ransford W. Palmer (ed.), *U.S.-Caribbean Relations: Their Impact on Peoples and Culture* (Praeger Publishers: Westport, 1998), p.14.

possessed by the country to be invaded and situated at a position well advanced beyond the objective of the invading fleet.<sup>235</sup>

Furthermore, the increasing significance of air power meant that 'a naval air service must be established, capable of accompanying and operating with the fleet in all waters of the globe'<sup>236</sup>. This prompted a raft of reports during the interwar years on the US need for bases in the Caribbean, Atlantic and Pacific, with a lobby in the US Congress and the US Navy Department to get the United States to purchase Caribbean territories from amongst the European colonies in part settlement for First World War debts<sup>237</sup>. This included an approach for the Cayman Islands in 1934.<sup>238</sup> Of course, as well as highlighting the increased strategic threat posed to the United States, technological advances further amplified the strategic and economic importance of oil. Up to the 1970s, the prime source of US oil imports was the countries of the circum-Caribbean, notably Venezuela, British Trinidad, Mexico, Columbia and Dutch Aruba and Curaçao<sup>239</sup>. In addition, this area was also the source of two other important raw minerals, bauxite, used in aircraft production, and mica, used in the manufacture of radios, radars, motors and generators. By 1939, the British and Dutch Guianas were the world's largest producers of bauxite an industry controlled primarily by the US-led Aluminum Company of America (ALCOA), and provided the United States with 50 per cent of its needs at the outbreak of the

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<sup>235</sup> Lt. Commander Virgil Baker, US Navy District Communications Superintendent in Puerto Rico, cited in Baptiste, 'United States-Caribbean Relations from World War II to the Present', pp.14-15.

<sup>236</sup> General Board of the US Navy Department, cited in Baptiste, p.15.

<sup>237</sup> Baptiste, p.13.

<sup>238</sup> Williams, *A History of the Cayman Islands*, p.79.

<sup>239</sup> Baptiste, p.16.



Second World War<sup>240</sup>. Safeguarding the channels to these vital raw materials for both the American military and the rest of the economy was of extreme importance.

Amongst the American troops initially stationed on Trinidad, and despite protests from both Governor Young and local nationalists, were 2,484 black soldiers. Concentrated in only two locations on the island, they caused a significant imbalance in the male-female population ratio within that ethnic group. Local males suddenly found themselves in increased and uneven competition for the island's women. In their favour, the Americans had 'the attractiveness of their uniform, the possession of more money and time to enjoy it, and the novelty of being foreigners'<sup>241</sup>. Prostitution rose exponentially, recorded in calypsos such as 'Rum and Coca Cola', which tells of "Both mother and daughter/Working for the Yankee dollar". The young women of Trinidad were 'defying tradition, custom and authority for the generous rewards for sexual favours which the black Americans were willing to pay', and in doing so 'threatened the social fabric of the community'<sup>242</sup>. This caused acute resentment amongst local black males. Furthermore, 'the unrelieved tension and inactivity in the Caribbean war theatre aggravated the ill feelings', leading to 'numerous incidents of trigger-happy soldiers using the local inhabitants for target practice'<sup>243</sup>. Trinidadian men, whose identity was intrinsically linked with strong masculinity, found themselves emasculated as traditional gender roles and assumptions were quickly demolished. This crisis of identity led Trinidadian men

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<sup>240</sup> Ibid., pp.15-6.

<sup>241</sup> Annette Palmer, 'The Politics of Race and War: Black American Soldiers in the Caribbean Theater During the Second World War', *Military Affairs*, Vol. 47, No. 2 (Apr., 1983), p.59.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid., p.60.

<sup>243</sup> Annette Catherine Palmer, 'The United States and the Commonwealth Caribbean, 1940-45', Ph.D. thesis (Fordham University, 1979), p.251

to seek to reframe their masculinity within this new social paradigm, externalising itself for some in acts of crime and violence. Others drew on the tradition of the calypso warrior, defining their masculinity through military service in the local volunteer forces, including the TRNVR, and pursuit of their own warrior deeds.

The travelling British journalist Arthur Calder-Marshall, visiting the island in the late 1930s, commented that 'if a free ballot were taken in Trinidad as to whether the inhabitants would prefer to remain British subjects or join with the United States, there is no doubt that a large majority would be in favour of making the change'. He added that 'among the coloured people of Trinidad, I met no one who felt loyalty to the Empire, and among the white Trinidadians, a negligible few.'<sup>244</sup> Yet, amongst those who volunteered for the TRNVR, imperial patriotism was audibly expressed in musical form. As sea shanties have been synonymous with the life of sailors for centuries, songs also became an integral part of naval life for Trinidadians. These songs however carried added cultural currency through their manifestation in calypso, a form indigenous to and deeply engrained in the fabric of Trinidadian society, where calypsonians took on the role of social and political commentators. Sailors in the TRNVR carried this torch, the chorus of one such example being:

Commander Lindsay say

Cheer boys cheer

With unity and the TNV

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<sup>244</sup> Arthur C. Marshall, "Trinidad wants to be American", *Living*, December 1938, pp.322-23 quoted in Annette Catherine Palmer, 'The United States and the Commonwealth Caribbean, 1940-45', Ph.D. thesis (Fordham University, 1979), p.55.

We gonna conquer Germany.<sup>245</sup>

Note the rhythm of the chorus and the phonetic spelling of 'gonna', reflecting Creole dialect. Naval songs for Trinidadians were more than ditties sang to relieve boredom and pass the time. They were expressions of national identity. Here though, traditional cultural forms were being used not as anti-colonial nationalistic expressions, but to reaffirm Trinidadian identity with the imperial cause, united in their mutual struggle against Germany. This does not appear to reflect Calder-Marshall's observations, or historian Annette Palmer's opinion that this situation did not improve there or on the other islands when the war started<sup>246</sup>. It can be argued that there was clearly a degree of loyalty to Britain amongst those Trinidadians who served, and who chose to vocalise this 'unity' in this manner. The above chorus is in fact a clear pastiche of a famous patriotic calypso song from the First World War, written by Henry Forbes:

Run you run, Kaiser William, run your run) *repeat [sic]*

Hear what Kitchener say: cheer, boys, cheer

With surety and sincerity

We going conquer Germany<sup>247</sup>

Another naval-themed calypso from the Second World War was written by 'Atilla the Hun' celebrating the destruction of the German 'pocket battleship' *Graf Spee*, which had sunk nine merchantmen in the Atlantic, affecting food supplies to Trinidad:

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<sup>245</sup> 'A Short Story of the Trinidad Royal Naval Reserve', pp.3-4.

<sup>246</sup> Annette Palmer, 'Rum and Coca Cola: The United States in the British Caribbean 1940-1945', *The Americas*, Vol. 43, No. 4 (Apr., 1987), pp.441-2.

<sup>247</sup> Quoted in Errol G. Hill, 'Calypso and War', *Black American Literature Forum*, Vol.23, No.1 (Spring, 1989), p.68.

The sinking of the Admiral Graf Spee

Must remain incontestably

A monumental testimony

To Britain's naval supremacy.<sup>248</sup>

Such songs tied into calypso's rooted associations with battles and warrior deeds, and provide a deeper cultural interpretation as to why Trinidadians enlisted in the armed forces. The origins of modern calypso can be traced to nineteenth century calinda chants which accompanied stickfighter duels, and further back than that it has roots in the *djeli*, West African tribal singers who would praise the heroic exploits of the tribe's warriors and revile its enemies<sup>249</sup>. As an extension of this, calypso was overwhelmingly a male discourse, and the connection between masculinity and the complex of warriorhood was a prominent feature in the formation of Trinidadian identity after emancipation which carried over into the twentieth century<sup>250</sup>. The act of the stickfight itself is a crude metaphor for 'manliness', with the points of the sticks carved in the shape of phalluses. When Trinidadians enlisted into the TRNVR and armed forces in general, they were doing so for more than merely financial betterment, imperial patriotism, and national honour; deeper than that they were responding to the calypso warrior's call. War allowed them to prove themselves as men, and more significantly, as Trinidadian men, as had been ingrained in them through songs and traditions passed down through the island's history and culture. When the men of the TRNVR sang calypsos, they were framing their own heroic

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<sup>248</sup> Ibid., p.74.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid., pp.61-2.

<sup>250</sup> Gordon Rohlehr, 'I Lawa: The Construction of Masculinity in Trinidad and Tobago Calypso', in Rhoda E. Reddock, *Interrogating Caribbean Masculinities: Theoretical and Empirical Analyses* (University Press of the West Indies, 2004), pp.326-8.

deeds as part of this longer warrior tradition, and in the process reaffirming their own masculinity, so affronted by the American servicemen.

## Imperial Propaganda

In Britain, discussions took place between the Ministry of Information and the Colonial Office regarding the raising of awareness in the Mother Country to the work done by the TRNVR and her sister units. For 'while Colonial Naval Forces have not had a spectacular part to play in the war, they have done, I think everybody will agree, a most useful job of work and we feel that far more should be published about them in the Press here'<sup>251</sup>. Yet, it was not just a case of giving the colonial sailors the recognition they deserved, and a number of strategic, economic and political factors also influenced this attitude. One was the Admiralty's 'policy to encourage the establishment of local Naval Forces in as many Colonies and territories as possible', and 'at the expense of the Colonial Governments concerned'<sup>252</sup>, thus reiterating the significance of strategic overstretch for the Navy, a situation further exacerbated by the war. Thus, there was a deliberate attempt to cajole colonial governments, whose interest in providing such forces 'should not be allowed to falter'. Again, there was a growing realisation of Britain's own dependency on the Empire, and the increasing mood of colonial 'partnership'. Therefore, 'if these Forces are to be maintained and if they are to be of the fullest value it is essential that a spirit of "esprit de corps" should be fostered', and 'we should display as much interest in them as possible, particularly

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<sup>251</sup> TNA, ADM 1/13014, From Downing Street to Admiralty, 18 November 1943.

<sup>252</sup> TNA, ADM 1/13014, 'Publicity in United Kingdom for Colonial Naval Forces', 24<sup>th</sup> December 1943.

in view of the fact mentioned by the Colonial Office that very satisfactory publicity has been given to Colonial personnel in the Army and R.A.F.<sup>253</sup>. Here, traditional inter-service rivalry and their competing interests for the same pools of colonial manpower also emerges. A call was thus put out for 'anything, in short, which would lend colour to a broadcast or published account of the work of these forces.'<sup>254</sup>

The most enthusiastic response came from the TRNVR, which had already utilised the local press in its self-promotion. Ironically, it was commented in an article published in the *Trinidad Guardian* on 5 November 1939, that the Navy earned its name the 'silent service' in part for its 'traditional distaste for publicity'<sup>255</sup>. Again, the article emphasised the seafaring qualities of 'Trinidad's Jack Tars':

All of them love the sea and most of them know the waters they patrol as well as they know the streets of Port-of-Spain. The majority are yachtsmen and keen deep-sea fishermen; there are some with Naval experience; others who have had merchant marine experience on the high seas; some who are youths fresh from school.<sup>256</sup>

Beneath such plaudits, however, lay an underlying sense of otherness and inferiority. Upon being asked how he liked it in the TRNVR, one signaller replied "I love it", leading the reporter to comment that 'there was not much of the Silent Service in that crisp confession. It came straight from the heart. A smiling young Negro in three words spoke volumes'<sup>257</sup>. This imagery conveys a dual message; first

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<sup>253</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>254</sup> TNA, ADM 1/13014, From A.R. Thomas, Deputy Public Relations Officer, to Information Officers, Fiji, Nigeria, Gold Coast, Sierra Leone, Gambia, Kenya, Tanganyika, Zanzibar, Ceylon, Trinidad, 21 January 1944.

<sup>255</sup> *Trinidad Guardian*, 5 November 1939, p.2.

<sup>256</sup> *Trinidad Guardian*, 5 November 1939, p.2.

<sup>257</sup> *Idem.*

it reflects the 'happy-go-lucky' black African stereotype, reinforcing white British distinctiveness and professionalism by the fact the signaller represents 'not much of the Silent Service'; secondly, it portrays a willing readiness to serve the British, and an endorsement of colonial authority.

In the piece written for the Ministry of Information, aimed at a different audience, a metropole as opposed to colonial one, there were attempts to relate the TRNVR to British audiences. Trinidad is described as 'an island a little larger than the County of Sussex', and for the men of the force, English sports such as 'Cricket is their main recreation, but they also enjoy football', though it is also mentioned that 'American baseball is beginning to become popular', illustrating the cultural influence from the American bases. Together these represent the paternalist teachings of superior western culture and civilisation, and their willing adoption by the locals. Cayman Islanders are singled out for special mention, as 'from these tiny islands alone come some of the best sailors in the West Indies'. Parts of the article read like a tourist brochure: 'swimming always helps to keep the heat of the tropical sun from becoming duly oppressive'; the crime, violence and poverty are not mentioned of the capital of Port of Spain, 'where cinemas and clubs provide an assortment of entertainments'. Overwhelmingly, no great sense of danger or sense of the war is conveyed in the piece. Instead, the work carried out by the TRNVR is described as 'a hard grind each day', and 'dull work' that will 'in some small way' ultimately contribute to Britain's victory:

Their jobs in the Trinidad Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve are not exciting, and carry few thrills, and few thanks, but it is a job that has to be done, and they do it with a will, knowing that by so doing, they will assist in some

way to shorten the war and allow them to get back to their jobs as fishermen, as cotton growers, sugar workers, and the numerous interesting West Indian industries that through shortage of labour are now suffering.<sup>258</sup>

The mention of 'interesting' West Indian industries reemphasises the traditional imperial division of labour, and equates the provision of naval service with that of raw materials. This does not represent an equal relationship, but reemphasises an economic, and by extension racial, hierarchy whereby the colonies supply their resources, in this case manpower, for the benefit of Britain. It is an inversion of contemporary rhetoric regarding 'development' and contradicts the supposed role reversal whereby the 'mother country' instead provides aid to her colonial children. The piece is not so much a celebration of the TRNVR's valuable contribution, but rather serves as propaganda for the imperial status quo and to reassure people back in Britain, whose confidence had been shaken, that the Empire and their world status that went with that was not about to crumble. Again, the final paragraph emphasises that 'the work that the Trinidad Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve does has to be done by someone', inferring it as being of lowly status, but suitable for colonials.

The photographs which accompanied the Ministry of Information's propaganda visually emphasises this imperial racial ordering, displaying white officers inspecting darker-skinned subordinates, deferentially standing at attention:

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<sup>258</sup> TNA, ADM 1/13014, 'Publicity in United Kingdom for Colonial Naval Forces', 1944.



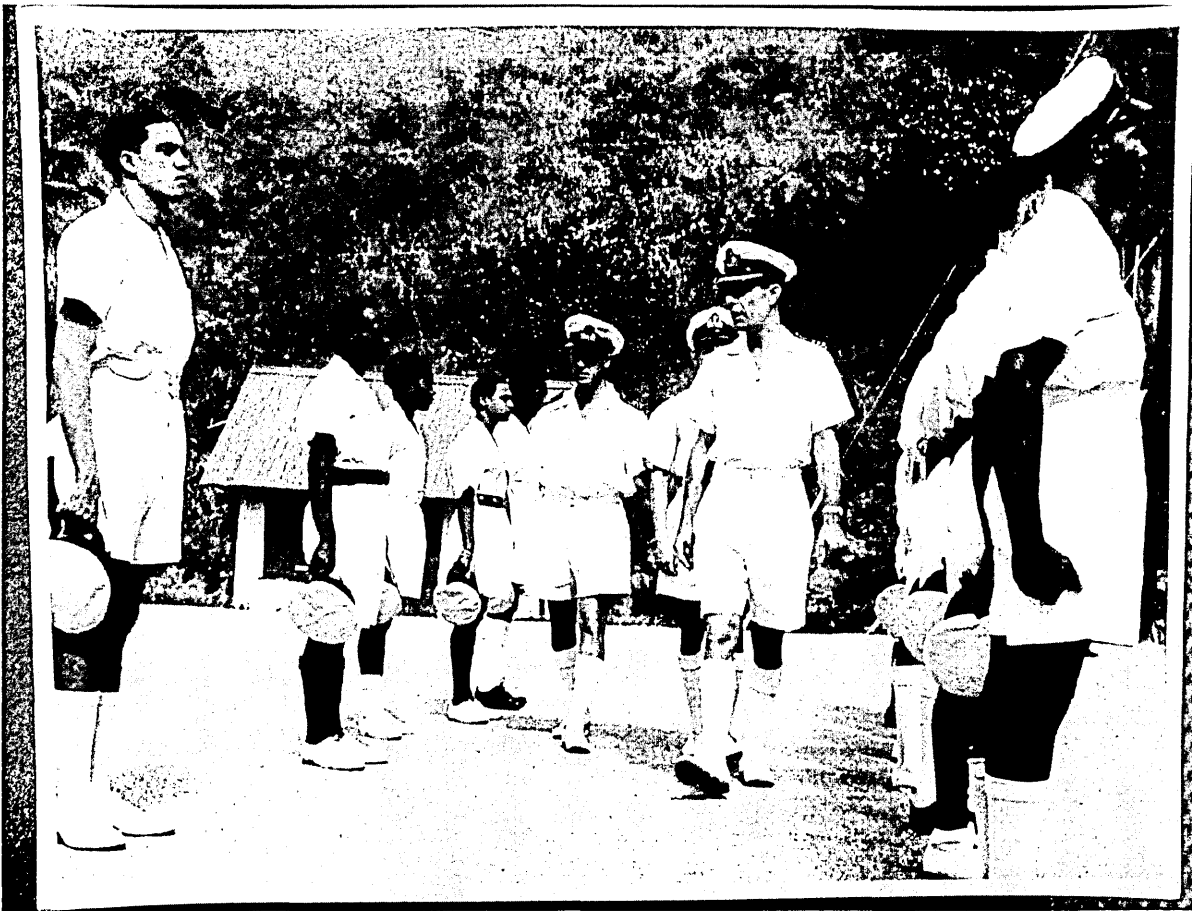


Image 2. TRNVR ratings under inspection [Source: TNA, ADM 1/13014 'Publicity in UK for Colonial Naval Forces']

Another depicts a British flag officer stopping to speak to a young black rating:

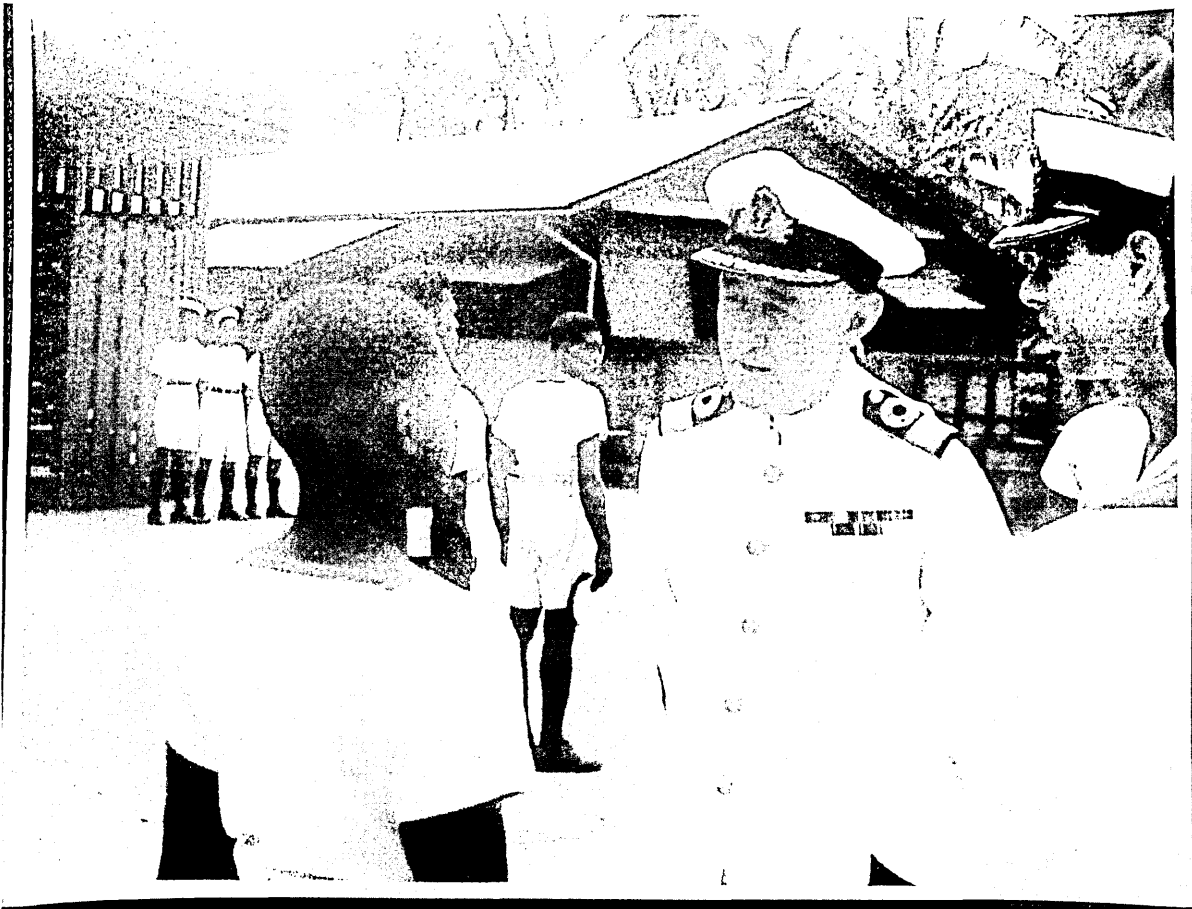
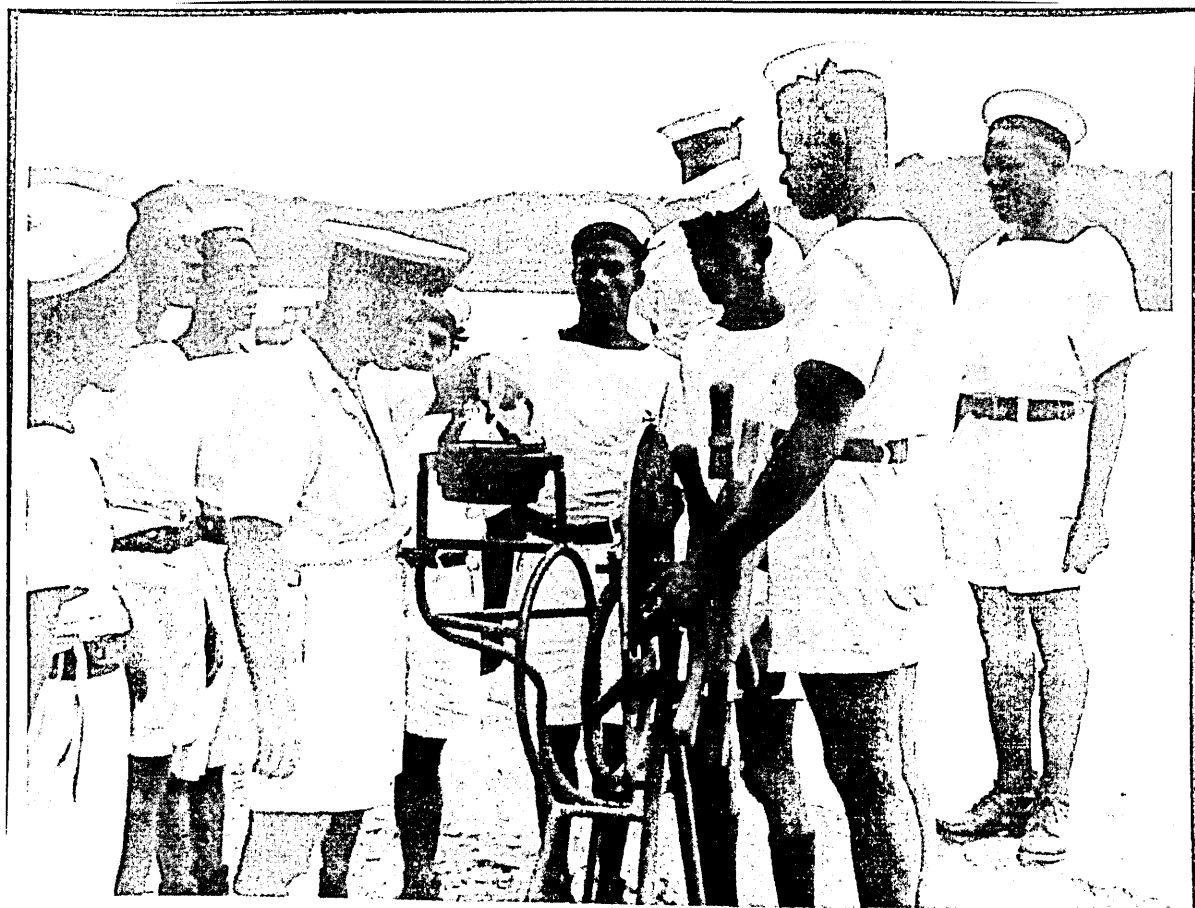
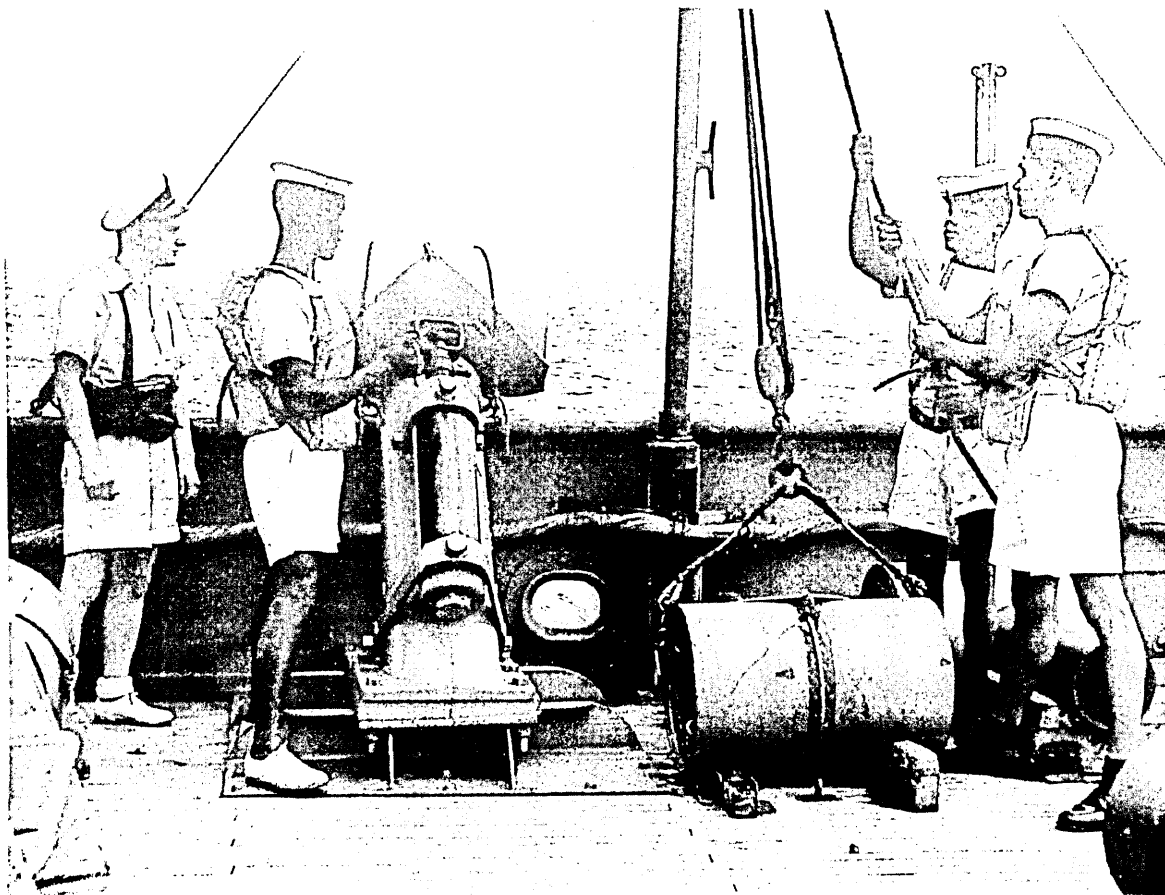


Image 3. TRNVR rating with flag officer [Source: TNA, ADM 1/13014 'Publicity in UK for Colonial Naval Forces']

Such paternalist messages were reinforced in several scenes portraying British officers giving instruction to attentive local recruits in a variety of naval matters:



## Discrimination and Disorder

The implicit racial prejudice of this imperial propaganda manifested itself in explicit racial discrimination experienced by TRNVR ratings, both at home and overseas. The seafaring race lobby again reared its head when the force was considered for deployment to other theatres, and it was suggested by the Captain-in-Charge at Port of Spain that the coloured and black ratings should be sent to 'tropical climates only', and only with 'forces already employing such persons'<sup>259</sup>. Their perceived racial characteristics largely excluded them from leadership roles as officers. Deemed 'useful material if well led', their perceived 'lack of imagination' was seen to make them 'very suitable for monotonous work, such as mine sweeping and local patrols'. Yet 'being naturally unimaginative' also made them 'generally unable to concentrate for long periods at a time', which excluding them from higher technical training in Anti-Submarine, Gunnery, Radar and Torpedo branches. The 'professional ability' of West Indians was only considered 'sufficient for "second line" service'<sup>260</sup>, and it was believed that 'if ratings have to qualify in accordance with [Royal] naval standards, that the standard of intellect will debar practically all coloured and black ratings from general service in the Royal Navy'<sup>261</sup>. Though it was considered that even the West Indian 'European' had by and large made a 'disappointing officer', and

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<sup>259</sup> TNA, ADM 1/23215, Captain in Charge Port of Spain's report no. 27/2359/3665, to the C-in-C American and West Indies' station, 12 February 1941, pp.2-3.

<sup>260</sup> TNA, ADM 1/23215, 'Future of the Trinidad Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve', 17 July 1944, p.1.

<sup>261</sup> TNA, ADM 1/23215, Captain in Charge Port of Spain's report no. 27/2359/3665, 12 February 1941, to the C-in-C American and West Indies' station, pp.2-3.

required 'considerable training in an environment other than the West Indies'<sup>262</sup>, ultimately there was nothing innate that was seen as preventative from him taking a place in the fleet other than the morally-sapping environment in which he found himself.

The policy of appointing officers based upon colour and social status and not the professional attributes needed for the Navy, in stark contrast to the enlisted crew whose seafaring qualities were strongly emphasised, meant that there was a lack of respect in the chain in command:

During the war, clerks and businessmen who had no business in the Navy got commissions and spoke harshly to ratings to hide their inabilities. They shouted commands at you because they weren't sure of what they were doing. They wore their uniforms smartly because that was one of the ways you knew they were officers. And they kept harping on at you to do this and do that, pull up your stockings, straighten your cap, and "wipe that grin off your face".<sup>263</sup>

Though this may have been the attitude of the locally-mobilised part-timers, there was more respect for the full Royal Navy officers seconded to the force, both for their professionalism and the mutual respect they showed towards the men. This was manifested in the form of a tall, blue-eyed Lieutenant referred to by Selvon as 'G.P.':

I felt I'd trust him blindly, do anything he ordered. Out of the scores of men who wore officers' uniforms, he was the only one who made us like being under his command. But for all that, I never thought of him as an officer so

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<sup>262</sup> Ibid., p.3.

<sup>263</sup> Michael Wentworth (Sam Selvon), 'A Man I Remember', *Evening News* (Trinidad), 27 March 1948, p.3, Item 579, Sam Selvon Collection, UWI, Trinidad and Tobago.

much as a rational human being. He was one who put ideals and high thoughts above everything. He was a thinker, then a gentlemen, then an officer... He was stern, but understanding. He was an officer, but he didn't think it below his dignity to greet you with a good morning and a smile. He'd come and yarn when you were on duty, for he knew how difficult it was to keep awake when you were tired and sleep as just an eye-blink away... Other officers we feared or hated, but G.P. won our respect and admiration.<sup>264</sup>

Part of this mutual respect stemmed from the fact that G.P. was not aloof from his men, the local culture or customs, but in fact expressed a genuine interest in them and learning more, and he 'was one of the first persons to see and encourage Selvon's writings'<sup>265</sup>:

He ate "khaja", "mitai", and "mahambhog" (Indian sweetmeats) and enjoyed them. After the meeting we had a chat with the Pundit, and he showed great interest in the Hindu religion. Afterwards he told me that he had learned a lot. On duty nights, I told him all I could of Trinidad. He wanted to know of our culture, our ways of living, our political trends.<sup>266</sup>

Such officers were in the minority, however.

The TRNVR was ultimately never deployed to East Asia. During a port call by one TRNVR vessel to Durban, South Africa, violent disturbances broke out when the local bars refused to serve TRNVR ratings. It was later emphasised in the local

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<sup>264</sup> Idem.

<sup>265</sup> Sam Selvon, *Foreday Morning: Selected Prose 1946-1989* (Essex, 1989), p.xii.

<sup>266</sup> Michael Wentworth (Sam Selvon), 'A Man I Remember', *Evening News* (Trinidad), 27 March 1948, p.3, Item 579, Sam Selvon Collection, UWI, Trinidad and Tobago.

papers the next day that they were West Indians not Africans, and were to have European facilities<sup>267</sup>.

The reality though, was they were not treated the same as Europeans. Back in Trinidad, if a coloured rating committed an offence he was sent to the Royal Gaol among ordinary criminals, but 'owing to no white warders being available, it was considered unsuitable'<sup>268</sup> for white ratings and officers, who would instead be detained at the barracks. This discrimination led to racial disturbances on the 14th and 15th May 1943 at the TRNVR base at Staubles Bay. Two coloured ratings, Ordinary seamen Harrington and Thomas, had been arrested for disobeying orders. Following their arrest a number of escape attempts were made leading to violent exchanges. Several guards refused to apprehend Thomas after he appealed that 'they, as coloured men, should be his friend and not arrest him'<sup>269</sup>, after which a white naval guard was ordered to Staubles to arrest him. Meanwhile four deserters took the opportunity to cause trouble at the base. An anonymous source stated that [quote] 'the coloured boys are under-rated to such an extent and maltreated that in every one of their faces you can just see discontent, hatred and even fear... they are being treated like slaves... we are volunteer soldiers of the Admiralty - we ought to have white rights... then you hear some fancified [*sic*] speeches about democracy'<sup>270</sup>. Such men clearly saw through colonial propaganda attempts to mitigate the clear hypocrisy of wartime rhetoric, and whereas Caymanians like Harry McCoy identified with Britishness and thus believed the schooled imperial rhetoric that 'Britons never

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<sup>267</sup> Lionel Straker, 'A Stoker in the Trinidad Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve', The Building Exploratory, 31 January 2006, [www.brickfields.org.uk](http://www.brickfields.org.uk).

<sup>268</sup> TNA, ADM 1/11057, 'Trinidad - Report of Proceedings from January 1<sup>st</sup> to March 31<sup>st</sup>, 1941', p.1.

<sup>269</sup> TNA, CO 968/80/7, 'The disturbances at TRNVR HQ May 14-15, 1943 and their causes', 9 October 1943, p.1.

<sup>270</sup> TNA, ADM 178/301, 'Opinion voiced about the TRNVR', Appendix to Board of Inquiry Proceedings, 1943.

will be slaves', this was not the case for Trinidadians who felt they were perceived and treated as inferior. Service disenchantment was epitomised in the dialectic line 'God bless Hitler, God bless Uncle Sam and fook the TRNVR Navy'<sup>271</sup>, found written upon one of the prison cell walls. Lieutenant-Commander Wilkinson, the Commanding Officer at Staubles, was singled out for particularly derogatory abuse. He was renowned as a tough officer, nicknamed 'The Dragon' on account of the dragoon tattoo adorning his arm, and thrice weekly he would read out the Articles of War to the men, emphasising that "Any man who shall desert in the face of the Enemy - the Penalty is Death in accordance with King's Regulations and Admiralty instructions".<sup>272</sup> The board of enquiry later agreed that the ratings had 'ample cause for discontent' which arose from a 'complete absence of sympathy for the men shown by the officers'<sup>273</sup>. Wilkinson remained in his position, however, with the First Lieutenant Anderson made the scapegoat and transferred to another post. Discrimination was also material as well as verbal. The rates of pay for TRNVR ratings 'compared very unfavourably with the local military forces' and their British counterparts and they did not receive family allowances<sup>274</sup>. This was revised following the disturbances, with 'an increase to full British rates of pay for all personnel and the introduction of family allowances at full British rates for officers and 2/3 British rates for other ranks.'<sup>275</sup>

Yet feelings of discontent were not isolated to prisoners and deserters. On 5 July the previous year, Ordinary Seaman Edgar Mittelholzer, a Guyanese of German

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<sup>271</sup> TNA, ADM 178/301, 'Copy of Cell Writings', Appendix to Board of Inquiry Proceedings, 1943.

<sup>272</sup> Robin Austin, 'Wartime Memoirs of Robin Austin', *Journal of the Barbados Museum and Historical Society*, Vol. XLVI (2000), pp.161-186, p.168.

<sup>273</sup> TNA, ADM 178/301, 'Disturbances at Staubles - Interim Report of Board of Enquiry', letter 26 May 1943.

<sup>274</sup> TNA, CO 968/145/1, From Sabben-Clare to Commodore Dick, January 1944.

<sup>275</sup> TNA, CO 968/80/4, Colonial Naval Forces - Trinidad R.N.V.R., 1943, p.36.



extraction, who like Sam Selvon would become a leading Caribbean writer after the war, submitted his letter of resignation after only 10 months in the force. 'Deeming it my duty to give some service to the Empire'<sup>276</sup>, he left Guyana to join the TRNVR in December 1941, in what he would consider to be 'one of the blackest and most unpleasant interludes in his life'<sup>277</sup>. His experiences in the force had caused him to lose 'my spirit and enthusiasm for everything'. His resignation was prompted by his transfer to Staubles for Able Bodied (AB) Seaman training, away from his post at the Quartermaster's office at HMS *Benbow* in Port of Spain. This meant that even if he were to have passed the AB test, he would have received \$17 to \$18 less victualling allowance than had he still been an Ordinary Seaman living in the capital. His primary concern was his ability to support his wife, whom he had married four months previously, and upon joining he had been made to understand that the wives and family of naval men would be provided for. Yet upon taking his problem to the aforementioned Commander Wilkinson, he was told he 'should have thought of that before [he] got married'. Mittelholzer goes on to say about Wilkinson:

I have a commanding officer who is harsh and unsympathetic and even indifferent and contemptuous of my domestic affairs... there isn't a single man on this base who has a good word for Lt. Commander Wilkinson. Not ten minutes pass - and I mean this literally - without somebody uttering a resentful statement against this monstrous tyrant, and every day the grumblings of the men rise in tone.<sup>278</sup>

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<sup>276</sup> Letter from Mittelholzer to Captain C.C. Denison, HMS *Benbow*, 5 July 1942, private collection of Michael Gilkes obtained from Jacqueline Mittelholzer.

<sup>277</sup> A.J. Seymour, *Edgar Mittelholzer: the man and his work, being the text of the 1967 Edgar Mittelholzer Memorial Lectures* (Georgetown, Guyana, 1968), p.12.

<sup>278</sup> Letter from Mittelholzer to Captain C.C. Denison, HMS *Benbow*, 5 July 1942, private collection of Michael Gilkes obtained from Jacqueline Mittelholzer.

Ultimately these 'grumblings' grew into the mini-mutiny which broke out at the base the following year. His resignation was turned down, and to get discharged from the Navy, Mittelholzer 'had to feign madness and perform the works of a madman. His enemies say that these were natural acts as he was cracked anyhow, but his friends tell of his storming into an officer's room and carrying on in some outlandish manner'<sup>279</sup>. Members of the force such as Selvon seemed to believe that Mittelholzer was mad, ascribed in part to his literary bent; to write, like being mad, placed one outside of social convention. For some, such aspirations represented an unrealistic position to achieve within colonial society, and thus they became associated with madness:

When I had left home in 1950, people who wrote poems or stories were definitely mad, only fit for the madhouse up in St. Anns. I can remember before I began to write seriously, seeing the Guyanese novelist Edgar Mittelholzer strolling around the Savannah in Port of Spain, and thinking to myself that this was the man that everybody said was crazy, that he wrote books, whoever heard of a thing like that?<sup>280</sup>

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<sup>279</sup> A.J. Seymour, *Edgar Mittelholzer: the man and his work, being the text of the 1967 Edgar Mittelholzer Memorial Lectures* (Georgetown, Guyana, 1968), p.13. Some uncorroborated anecdotes regarding Mittelholzer's behaviour in the navy include the following (courtesy of Juanita Cox): '1) He was given instructions, but when he refused to carry out the task he was told by his commander that he did not have an option so long as he was wearing the Kings uniform. Mittelholzer thus took off all his clothes and stood stark naked before wandering off to his quarters; 2) Mittelholzer was under surveillance according to one person because he kept writing letters in support of the communists and according to another person because he kept writing letters in support of the fascists; 3) One of the ships captains was murdered and Mittelholzer was accused because other naval ratings informed police that there had been strange goings-on between them. When interrogated Mittelholzer explained that he and the captain believed in astral projection and he had been trying to see if they could send telepathic messages to one another. The police called in a psychologist and Mittelholzer was branded a mad man. With the help of his wife's friends, Mittelholzer was released from custody but he found the experience humiliating. 4) Mittelholzer had often helped out the English members of the navy by writing letters homes to their loved ones so was stunned that they continued to treat him as an inferior despite the evident fact that he was more intelligent than them.'

<sup>280</sup> Item 90, p.10, Sam Selvon Collection, UWI, Trinidad and Tobago.

In the same month that Mittelholzer's resignation letter was submitted, the July edition of *The Goshawk*, the local Royal Navy journal, carried a leading article entitled 'Toleration':

A uniform can make a civilian resemble a soldier or a sailor, authority can regiment his mind, but only tolerant and wise leadership can make him fight... Buchan has written that the nursing ground of intolerance is a complete dogmatic certainty about the ordering of the World... Intolerant authority is the essence of Nazism... if there must be tolerance in authority there must also be tolerance of authority. If it be true that man cries out for authority then man must be prepared to trust and believe in authority... the British, as a race [are] the most tolerant among men. Not only do we believe in toleration for ourselves but also for others. We are prepared to fight for that and, in fact, it is that for which we are fighting.<sup>281</sup>

This article carries several, almost contradictory, messages. It emphasises Britain's innate moral authority to lead next to the 'intolerant authority' of Nazism, and the need for Trinidadians and other colonial subjects to respect her authority, thus legitimising British rule and serving as a mechanism for the preservation of civil and military discipline. It is because of this selfless tolerance and universal human right for which Britain was fighting, thus highlighting the global nature of the war, and reiterating Trinidad's stake in it, even though the latter found herself on the periphery of the actual fighting. Yet, it quite profoundly stresses the need for British officers to act tolerantly in their positions of authority, disputing the innate racial nature of this quality. In the TRNVR, where racial ideology and stereotypes underpinned almost all

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<sup>281</sup> *The Goshawk: The Journal of the Royal Naval Air Station, Trinidad*, Vol.1, No.7 (July 1941), p.1.

aspects of force organisation, the quote adopted from novelist and imperial administrator John Buchan of how 'the nursing ground of intolerance is a complete dogmatic certainty about the ordering of the World' resonates profoundly. Considering once more the timing of the article, it is perhaps not coincidental that such warnings should go out when the 'grumbings' of discontent were beginning to be heard among the men on the ground.

The blatant intolerance and disregard for Mittelholzer's domestic affairs as displayed by Wilkinson contradicted assertions that 'one of the things we are supposed to be fighting for is the protection of our homes'<sup>282</sup>. Harking back to the earlier argument, the disruption caused by the incursion of American money into the colony, meant many local men, including Mittelholzer, could no longer provide for on their regular wages, leading some wives and girlfriends to the Americans. Thus, Mittelholzer's concerns are symptomatic of much larger social and economic issues. After the Staubles incident, the Admiralty recognised this problem and introduced a proper marriage allowance for the force.<sup>283</sup>

## **Post-War - Prestige, Professionalism and Prejudice**

From mid-1944, with the U-boat threat in the Caribbean quelled, discussions began to take place regarding the future of the TRNVR come the end of the war. Though there was no longer any obvious strategic threat, the continual maintenance

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<sup>282</sup> Letter from Mittelholzer to Captain C.C. Denison, HMS Benbow, 5 July 1942, private collection of Michael Gilkes obtained from Jacqueline Mittelholzer.

<sup>283</sup> TNA, CO 968/80/7, 'The disturbances at TRNVR HQ May 14-15, 1943 and their causes', 9 October 1943, p.3.

of a colonial naval presence was considered important so as to 'keep the White Ensign flying permanently in areas which the Royal Navy could visit only occasionally, and where the presence of other flags (e.g. in the West Indies) makes the need so much greater'<sup>284</sup>. The 'other flags' alluded to in this context were the stars and stripes of the United States. Since the Destroyers for Bases agreement had been signed, there were fears in some circles that it was the first step in an eventual American colonisation of the British Caribbean. These were exacerbated in April 1944 by a House of Representatives Naval Sub-Committee report, recommending the permanent possession of the leased bases.<sup>285</sup> It was thus suggested that the establishment of a full-time naval force in the region would act as a bulwark against American designs, and 'greatly assist in the task of keeping the Empire as a whole together and of upholding the prestige of His Majesty's Forces overseas.'<sup>286</sup> Though it was acknowledged that this was more 'for political rather than Naval reasons'<sup>287</sup>, and in this regard the Admiralty were subject to the interests of the local colonial governments:

The presence of British Island possession in what may be a permanent American sphere of influence requires a British Naval Force in being to assert sovereignty and keep intact the maritime rights and facilities required by British Sea Power in this area... West Indian Governments, particularly those with American Bases in their midst, are sensitive to the indirect political pressure which the presence of U.S. Armed Forces exerts

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<sup>284</sup> TNA, ADM 1/23215, 'Naval Forces of the Colonial Empire and Mandated Territories and Protectorates', p.3.

<sup>285</sup> Annette Catherine Palmer, 'The United States and the Commonwealth Caribbean, 1940-45', Ph.D. thesis (Fordham University, 1979), pp.254-5.

<sup>286</sup> TNA, ADM 1/23215, 'Naval Forces of the Colonial Empire and Mandated Territories and Protectorates', p.4.

<sup>287</sup> TNA, ADM 1/23215, 'Appreciation of Naval Organisation In The West Indies After The War', Senior British Naval Officer, Trinidad, 3 June 1945, p.2.

upon them... as long as this state of affairs continues they will press to have at least token British Forces in this area to act as a political counter balance.<sup>288</sup>

In this context it was emphasised that 'the necessity of encouraging citizenship and Empire responsibility amongst West Indians applies with equal force to local youth, and it is accentuated by the incidence of American occupation of bases in the West Indies'. It was believed that this could be achieved through 'the training and moral standards taught by the Navy'<sup>289</sup>.

Mr. Archer, representative of the Leeward Islands, expressed that he 'would like to see training carried on in the Colony - if only from a prestige stand point... where the White Ensign could be hoisted, or perhaps a Club or some other focal point established where a naval atmosphere could be fostered.'<sup>290</sup> It was also considered 'most important that British prestige should be promoted in Windward Islands', and therefore it was agreed at a conference of the West Indian colonial Governors that in addition to the Headquarters at Trinidad, minor sub-stations might be established either at Castries, St. Lucia, or St. Georges, St. Grenada to this effect.<sup>291</sup> St. Lucia was 'not only one of the poorest areas of the West Indies but was regarded as one of the slums of the Commonwealth and among the most poverty stricken areas of the new world'<sup>292</sup>. The island had been dependent on the coaling trade, in decline since the Navy and other ships moved across to oil. The

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<sup>288</sup> TNA, ADM 1/23215, 'Future of the Trinidad Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve', From The Senior British Naval Officer, Trinidad, To The Senior British Naval Officer, Western Atlantic, 17 July 1944, p.2.

<sup>289</sup> TNA, ADM 1/23215, 'Appreciation of Naval Organisation In The West Indies After The War', Senior British Naval Officer, Trinidad, 3 June 1945, p.5.

<sup>290</sup> TNA, ADM 1/23215, 'Resume of points of discussion at a meeting held at the Royal Naval Camp, Trinidad on 4<sup>th</sup> January', 1946, p.3.

<sup>291</sup> TNA, ADM 1/23215, From Governor Windward Islands To Secretary of State, 26 January 1946.

<sup>292</sup> O'Loughlin (1968), p.46, cited in Tennyson S. D. Joseph, *Decolonization in St. Lucia: Politics and Global Neoliberalism, 1945-2010* (Mississippi, 2011), p.21.

unemployment this created was 'aggravated by the existence of an economy of "notorious artificiality", associated with the availability of high-paying, short-term employment opportunities' created by the US military bases in the south of the island.<sup>293</sup> Thus a British naval presence was seen as a way of addressing this economic and political imbalance.

Although most of the British West Indies contributed to the manpower of the TRNVR, the same could not be said of its financial upkeep, which remained the responsibility of the Trinidadian legislative council, subsidised by the Admiralty during wartime. By contrast, it was suggested by the Admiralty that both the personnel and financial contributions towards the proposed 'Royal West Indian Navy' (RWIN) should be shared between all the colonies on a per capita basis, displayed in the table below:

**Table 4. Apportionment of colonial personnel and financial contributions to proposed Royal West Indian Navy**

Colony	Personnel	Finance
Trinidad	200	£44,000
Barbados	100	£22,000
Jamaica (including British Honduras and Cayman Islands)	100	£22,000
British Guiana	20	£4,400
Windward Islands	25	£5,500
Bahamas	20	£4,400
Leeward Islands	10	£2,200
<b>Total</b>	<b>475</b>	<b>£104,500</b>

Source: TNA, ADM 1/23215, 'Resume of points of discussion at a meeting held at the Royal Naval Camp, Trinidad on 4<sup>th</sup> January', 1946, p.5.

Yet despite there being general support for the new force in principle, few of the colonial representatives could commit to this expense. The old issue of whether

<sup>293</sup> Tennyson S. D. Joseph, *Decolonization in St. Lucia*, p.21.

control of the force should rest locally or with the Admiralty continued to be a stumbling block. The Admiralty wanted the colonies to take on the operational responsibility for the RWIN so that they would also be morally obligated to take on the financial responsibility also. It feared a repeat of the TNVF, whereby it was obliged to foot the additional costs for the force after it was placed at its general disposal:

The arguments in favour of local control appear to be as follows: (a) Colonial Governments may feel that if the Force are under their own control, greater interest would be fostered locally in imperial defence than under any system of control from Whitehall. (b) No room would be left for the criticism that the local Legislature was being asked to vote funds for forces not under its administration. You will appreciate that as Admiralty funds will be limited the feasibility of the Scheme for permanent Colonial Naval Forces may well depend, whatever the system of control, on the willingness of Colonial Governments to bear a large proportion of the cost.<sup>294</sup>

The problem was that while personnel and financial contributions for the RWIN were organised on 'a Federal basis and not a Colonial one', only one Governor could act as Commander-in-Chief, and inevitably that would be from Trinidad being the headquarters of the main force.<sup>295</sup> Discussions were consequently hampered by colonial parochialism, emphasised by Mr Lindo, the Jamaican representative, who stated that 'if his colony voted money it would be natural that there would be a feeling

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<sup>294</sup> TNA, ADM 1/23215, Letter from G.H. Hall to Colonial Office, 4 November 1945.

<sup>295</sup> TNA, ADM 1/23215, 'Appreciation of Naval Organisation In The West Indies After The War', Senior British Naval Officer, Trinidad, 3 June 1945, Appendix "A", p.8.



in some quarters that Jamaica had a claim to establishment of headquarters in that Colony.' He also pointed out the difficulty in passing the requisite legislation by eight separate political bodies.<sup>296</sup> When the question was subsequently considered in the Jamaican Executive Council, it was of the opinion that 'in view of the heavy programme of essential works to be undertaken in the next few years... it is not possible to justify a contribution from Jamaican funds for defence purposes other than a contribution of the annual grant of £25,000 towards Imperial defence.'<sup>297</sup>

The Barbados representative, Commander W.R.M. Wynne, also stated that the only way local control could work was 'for Trinidad or some other Colony to have charge of the Force with the functions of the other participating Colonies limited to making contributions of money and personnel', in which case 'such a force could scarcely be said to be a "Royal West Indian Navy" and such an arrangement is unlikely to be acceptable to the Legislature of this Island'.<sup>298</sup> Thus he 'emphasised that his Government wished the force to be under Admiralty control', which was exactly what the Admiralty did not want. In any case, like Jamaica, Barbados was not willing to exceed its existing imperial defence contribution of £6,000.<sup>299</sup> It was a similar pattern from the other colonies, expressions of moral support for the scheme, not backed up by the required financial support.<sup>300</sup>

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<sup>296</sup> TNA, ADM 1/23215, 'Resume of points of discussion at a meeting held at the Royal Naval Camp, Trinidad on 4<sup>th</sup> January', 1946, pp.2-3.

<sup>297</sup> TNA, ADM 1/23215, From The Governor of Jamaica to the A/Governor of Bermuda, 12 February 1946.

<sup>298</sup> TNA, ADM 1/23215, From Governor Grattan Bushe, Barbados, to G.H. Hall, Secretary of State for the Colonies, 22 January 1946, p.2.

<sup>299</sup> *Ibid.*, p.3.

<sup>300</sup> TNA, ADM 1/23215, From Governor Gordon Lethem, British Guiana, to G.H. Hall, 11 December 1945. 'Resume of points of discussion at a meeting held at the Royal Naval Camp, Trinidad on 4<sup>th</sup> January', 1946, p.3. From Governor Windward Islands To Secretary of State, 26 January 1946.

Nor were the problems restricted to the financial side, as there was considerable disagreement amongst the local naval authorities regarding the personnel of both the existing and proposed forces. While the Senior Naval Officer, Trinidad believed that the TRNVR was 'a loyal, well disciplined and efficient force and a considerable asset to the British West Indies'<sup>301</sup>, the Senior Intelligence Officer by contrast considered that with the 'exception of a few officers they are a useless lot' and it would be better to start again from the beginning'.<sup>302</sup> As well as keeping 'alive the Naval tradition springing from the present war' and forming 'a nucleus for naval expansion in the West Indies in the event of a future', it was hoped that a continued local naval force would 'encourage "sea-mindedness" in a population which, although utterly dependent on sea communication for its very existence, is singularly lacking in interest in sea-faring matters.'<sup>303</sup> This was emphasised in a census taken in December 1944, whereby only 13 officers and 277 members of the TRNVR indicated a definite willingness to stay on in a permanent force after the war.<sup>304</sup> Racial prejudice continued to influence the opinions of the British naval authorities. The Senior Operations Officer equated that lack of 'sea-mindedness' with the perception that the black ratings 'are not intelligent', for while 'as infantry men or Artillerymen they might be of great value... they could not man the ship properly', but to add white technical ratings into the mix 'would confuse the messing and bathing arrangements.'<sup>305</sup>

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<sup>301</sup> TNA, ADM 1/23215, 'Appreciation of Naval Organisation In The West Indies After The War', Senior British Naval Officer, Trinidad, 3 June 1945, p.1

<sup>302</sup> TNA, ADM 1/23215, 'West Indian Naval Force', Senior Officer (Intelligence), 28 March 1947.

<sup>303</sup> TNA, ADM 1/23215, 'Appreciation of Naval Organisation In The West Indies After The War', Senior British Naval Officer, Trinidad, 3 June 1945, p.5.

<sup>304</sup> *Ibid.*, p.3.

<sup>305</sup> TNA, ADM 1/23215, 'West Indian Naval Force', Senior Officer (Operations), 31 March 1947.

Despite this, 'a considerable number of European ratings possessing the higher technical qualifications' were considered necessary for the new force on account that 'experience has shown that the West Indian is not suitable for higher technical training in such specialist subjects as A/S, Gunnery, Radar, Torpedo etc., being naturally unimaginative and generally unable to concentrate for long periods of time'.<sup>306</sup> It was again reiterated that 'the West Indian negro, although of excellent physique, is mentally underdeveloped. He is not necessarily stupid but emotional and lacking in self-restraint and responsibility'. Consequently, 'a strict but paternal discipline is necessary and... it is therefore imperative that officers be of the highest quality'. The role poor leadership played in the indiscipline that rocked the TRNVR was tacitly acknowledged by the admittance that 'with certain notable exceptions the West Indian European has made a disappointing officer', though this was put down to the local environment. It was therefore considered necessary that the Senior Royal Naval Officers in charge of the other Headquarters, be appointed from the United Kingdom, and relieved after a normal commission period of two and a half years' so as to 'ensure that the organisation shall not become dormant through permanent senior appointments being held by persons who by long residence in the tropics lose their energy and efficiency or tend to regard their duties in the light of a "hobby"'.<sup>307</sup> Yet this failed to take into account the Britain's 'own manpower shortage'<sup>308</sup>, which such colonial naval forces were meant to mitigate.

No further progress was made, and the Admiralty resigned itself to the fact that the case for a 'permanent Naval Force in the West Indies after the war is not

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<sup>306</sup> TNA, ADM 1/23215, 'Appreciation of Naval Organisation In The West Indies After The War', Senior British Naval Officer, Trinidad, 3 June 1945, p.3.

<sup>307</sup> Ibid., Appendix "A", p.8.

<sup>308</sup> TNA, ADM 1/23215, 'Royal West Indian Navy', 11 October 1946.

convincing'. The lack of colonial financial support and their own racial prejudices combined to mean that 'there is a danger that insufficient local manpower will be available to meet the commitment', and ultimately 'its establishment appears neither practical nor economical.'<sup>309</sup>

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<sup>309</sup> TNA, ADM 1/23215, 'Appreciation of Naval Organisation In The West Indies After The War', Senior British Naval Officer, Trinidad, 3 June 1945, p.5.

## Conclusion

Though formerly established just after the outbreak of the Second World War, it was not a fear of Germany that was the main impetus behind the TRNVR's conception. Imperial overstretch affected not just Britain's ability to defend the Empire against external threats, but also internal dissidents who threatened the colonial status quo. Unable to spare imperial troops for internal security duties, local and metropole-based colonial officials and commercial interests hoped that raising a volunteer naval unit would improve the island's civil order, as well as lower its insurance premiums, in the face of growing Trinidadian labour nationalism, while the Navy looked to secure its oil supplies. The TRNVR was meant to be a symbol of Britain's prestige, but the poor quality of training and equipment afforded its recruits due to financial wrangling between the Imperial and colonial governments over who should foot the bill, meant the force lacked local authority and gravitas. Testament to the TRNVR's operational ineffectiveness is the fact that when Germany launched a serious U-boat campaign in the Caribbean from February 1942 it achieved huge successes, until the Americans took over anti-submarine operations.

There were some signs that the force helped cultivate imperial patriotism initially, expressed through jingoistic naval calypsos. Yet, colonial order began to break down after U-boat shipping losses took their toll on the island's food and supplies, and servicemen were marked out as targets for civilian discontent. The fractious situation was exacerbated by the United States' arrival following the Destroyers for Bases Agreement, with its troops undermining Trinidadian masculinity, while its money drew away potential recruits for the Navy to alternative employment.

Naval recruitment was thus opened up to the other British Caribbean colonies, with particular preference attached to Caymanians on account that they were a 'seafaring' race. Such ideologies underpinned the inherently racial nature of British colonial naval recruitment. Though seafaring experience was deemed a prerequisite for the enlisted men, it did not extend to the officer class, where the predominant attribute was the whiteness of their skin. It was well-recorded through anthropological surveys and colonial reports that the Caymanian black population was significantly lower than anywhere else in the Caribbean, and thus seafaring race theory was articulated to legitimise preferential selection on the basis of colour. Racial prejudices affected not only recruitment, but also operational deployment, with the force exempt from general service elsewhere with the Royal Navy on account of its black members' alleged mental deficiencies, and their character which was only deemed suited to tropical climates. Yet there also existed colonial prejudice, which was more ethnically than racially defined, as even the Caymanians were treated as inferior to the Europeans, notably in regards to medical care. The imperial hierarchy was then reinforced through imperial propaganda.

There was a clear distinction between the quality of the professional Royal Navy officers seconded to the force and local Europeans granted wartime commissions. Interestingly, it was the former who expressed more sympathy, interest and respect towards the indigenous customs and cultures they were unfamiliar with, whereas those raised in the colonies carried their local prejudices with them. Institutionalised discrimination also existed in the form of inferior pay and lack of marriage allowances for TRNVR ratings compared to their British Royal Navy counterparts. Such inequalities were reinforced by the Allied rhetoric that they were

fighting a war for democracy, further destabilised by the American influence. It was this that was of prime concern to the colonial and naval authorities after the threat of Germany had been eradicated. Once again, the force's *raison d'être* was defined in response to Britain's local position, with the primary concern not towards an external naval threat, but about fortifying Britain's imperial prestige and colonial authority in the face of America's growing hegemony. Yet, the scheme to form a permanent Royal West Indian Navy in the TRNVR's stead encountered the same obstructive issues of finance and manpower, and without the imperative of war, common consensus and imperial unity could not be found to offset the range of competing metropole, regional and local interests. The parochial ingroup mentality that had inhibited the growth of *esprit de corps* and shared service identity during wartime evinced itself on a political level, scuppering not only hopes for the naval force, but also ultimately West Indian Federation.

We now turn to a case where the colonial naval force did successfully evolve into a full, sovereign navy, that of Malaya. Here too though, imperial ideology and ethnic divisions would continue to inhibit its development, even after independence.

## Case Study Two: Southeast Asia

### Introduction

Much academic attention has been focused on the Singapore naval base, the 'impregnable fortress' constructed during the interwar years at great expense to the Empire, which ultimately did little to prevent the fall of British Malaya and the Straits Settlements to the Japanese on 15 February 1942 after just eight days of fighting<sup>310</sup>. Yet, local naval defence did not rest solely on this imperial 'white elephant', and the largest contingent of colonial naval personnel, outside of India, was raised in Southeast Asia. Malaya was the only dependency to form a full-time naval force, the Royal Navy (Malay Section), more commonly known as the 'Malay Navy', and this was supplemented by two naval reserve forces based in Singapore and Penang. Following the defeat at Singapore, the survivors of these forces continued to fight until the end of the war, mainly in Ceylon but also Australia and East Africa.

Unlike the Caribbean, where the surrender of the Axis powers meant there was no longer an operational imperative for the continued existence of local auxiliary naval units, the Malayan 'Emergency' of 1948 to 1960, followed by the Indonesian Confrontation or 'Konfrontasi' between 1962 and 1966, meant the Southeast Asian naval forces continued to find relevance in a shifting geopolitical landscape. The Cold War and decolonisation meant that rather than dying with British colonialism in 1957, the Malayan naval forces became the foundation for an independent,

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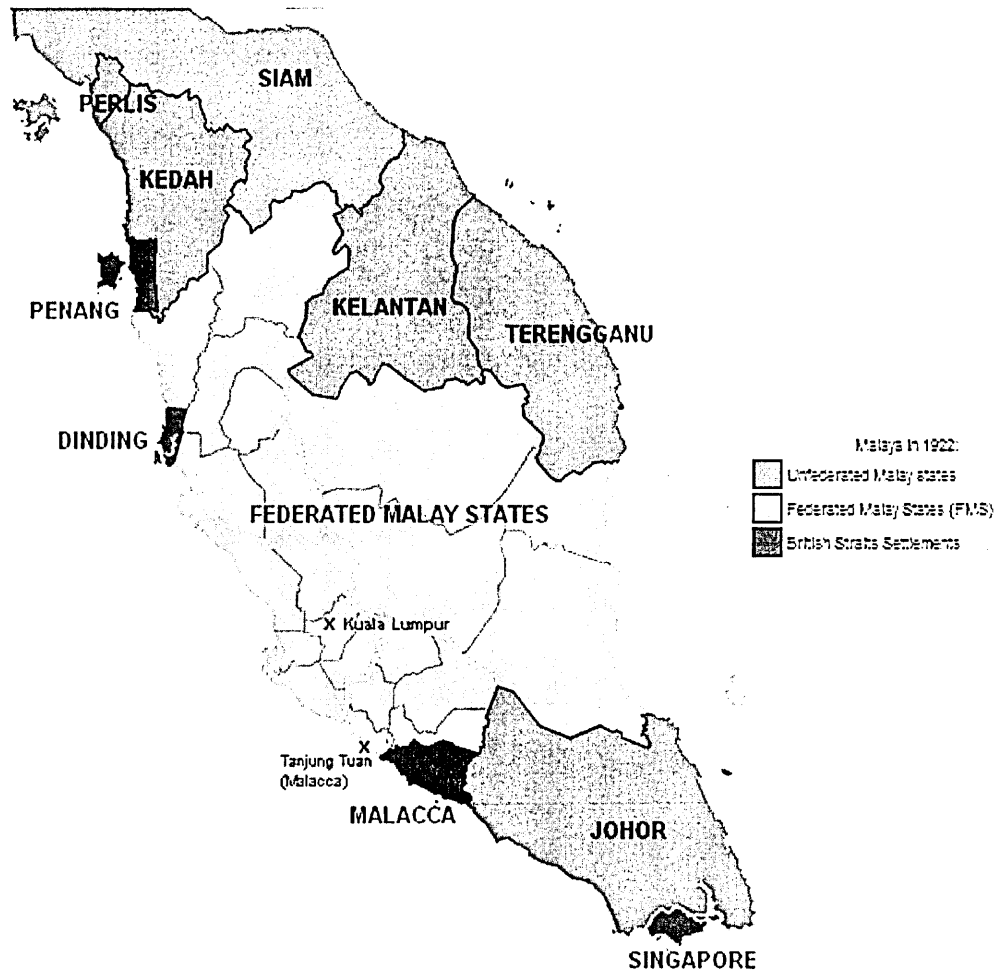
<sup>310</sup> See W. David McIntyre, *The Rise and Fall of the Singapore Naval Base, 1919-1942* (London, 1979), James Neidpath, *The Singapore Naval Base and the Defence of Britain's Eastern Empire, 1919-1941* (Oxford, 1981), Ian Hamill, *The Singapore Strategy and the Defence of Australia and New Zealand, 1919-1942* (Singapore, 1981).



professional Malayan Navy. They thus provide a significant case study for analysing issues of imperial transition and nationalisation. They also provide an opportunity for examining the colonial and post-colonial dynamics of the region's ethnic plurality, its impact on imperial racial ideology, naval recruitment and service, and the tensions this created, particularly following the intervention of nationalist politics in the operations of the Navy, with its policies of 'Islamisation' and affirmative action.

Part one of this case study analyses the key themes of the pre-1945 period: the origins of the Malayan naval forces; the influence of racial ideology upon early recruitment; the role and impact of the Second World War; and the effects of evacuation and exile in Ceylon upon service and ethnic unity. Part two will examine the post-Second World War period, where the main issues comprise: the British return to Malaya; the influence and 'collaboration' of Chinese secret societies; the reconstitution of the force and its role during the 'Emergency'; issues of force expansion and nationalisation; the influence of graft, corruption and patronage; and the effects of 'Islamisation' and the introduction of a quota system upon naval efficiency and esprit de corps.

Map 3. British Malaya, c.1922



[Source: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Straits\\_Settlements](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Straits_Settlements)]

## Origins

As early as 1902, significantly the year the Anglo-Japanese naval treaty was signed, the military authorities in Malaya began pressing for the creation of locally-recruited volunteer forces. Ian Hamilton, the inspector-general of overseas forces argued in 1913 that 'a loyal and patriotic Malay nation, trained to arms might well prove in future a fitting guardian for the western portal to the Pacific, a doughty defender of one of the richest and fairest portions of the British Empire'<sup>311</sup>. Malays, however, were considered 'soft', 'indolent', and not a 'martial' race<sup>312</sup>. This belief was influenced by the view that the Malays had not put up the fierce resistance to colonialism that the Indian martial races had done, and they were too 'easy going' to be martial<sup>313</sup>. The governor, Arthur Young, argued that Malays would 'resist routine and also prolonged barrack life with continual discipline', though as an alternative he suggested that 'a naval unit would appeal to the Malay, he would feel perfectly at home on the water. His objection to discipline and hard work on land would not be the same when on water'. This proposal was considered unfeasible, however, due to the expense in providing ships, and the interference it would cause with their 'padi planting and harvest'<sup>314</sup>.

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<sup>311</sup> Nadzan Haron, 'Colonial Defence and British Approach to the Problems in Malaya 1874-1918', *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol.24, No.2 (May, 1990), pp.275-295, pp.286-287.

<sup>312</sup> Thomas R. Metcalf, *Imperial Connections: India in the Indian Ocean Arena, 1860-1920* (London, 2007), p.77.

<sup>313</sup> Kevin Blackburn, 'Colonial forces as postcolonial memories: The commemoration and memory of the Malay Regiment in modern Malaysia and Singapore', Karl Hack and Tobias Rettig (eds.), *Colonial Armies in Southeast Asia* (London, 2006), p.302.

<sup>314</sup> Haron, 'Colonial Defence and British Approach to the Problems in Malaya 1874-1918', p.287.

There are records of a temporary, locally-instigated unit named the Coast Defence Volunteers, raised in 1917 in Singapore and Penang, which served afloat conducting anti-submarine patrols.<sup>315</sup> Its nine officers and 200 other ranks were drawn solely from European manpower, however, and the unit was disbanded at the end of the First World War.

Discussion did not seriously arise regarding the formation of a more permanent local naval force in Singapore until the mid-1920s. One lesson learnt from the First World War was, 'that no force it is possible to maintain in time of peace can be wholly adequate for all the duties that fall upon the Navy of such an empire as ours in time of war'<sup>316</sup>. The creation of other colonial naval units was seen as necessary to 'place our defences on sound foundations', and 'draw into active sympathy with them the very considerable number of our citizens who have inherited the ardent sea-love of our native country'<sup>317</sup>. Not only would local naval units plug operational gaps, but they were also seen as forces for the spread of British prestige and imperial unity.

The priority given to creating naval reserves in Singapore and Hong Kong, much like the decision to construct the Singapore naval base, was heavily influenced by the shifting geo-political landscape, significantly the emergence of Japan as a naval superpower with growing imperial ambitions of its own and a deteriorating relationship with Britain:

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<sup>315</sup> Sir Charles Lucas, *The Empire At War*, Vol.II (Oxford, 1923), p.382, p.385.

<sup>316</sup> *Straits Times*, 18 April 1925, p.8. This was demonstrated by the fact that two-thirds of the struggle against the German u-boats in the First World War had fallen to reserve men who plugged such deficiencies until regular naval forces became available, or freed up the regulars for more urgent duty elsewhere.

<sup>317</sup> *Straits Times*, 18 April 1925, p.8.

...If the hopes of a long peace are disappointed we who live on the border of the Pacific will be nearer to the war than we were to the last great world conflagration. Siam is our only land neighbour and she is our friend and ally. If we have to face danger it will come to us over the blue waters, and when our big ships go forth to fight, we shall need watchful eyes to guard our commerce, and to keep our waters free from hidden dangers.<sup>318</sup>

Historical irony aside, this is an apt summary of the Royal Navy's envisaged future role. Unable to perform both tasks, the RN would resort to its traditional mission of seeking out and engaging enemy ships on the high seas, leaving duties such as harbour defence, local convoy escorts, minesweeping, and anti-submarine patrols to colonial naval reserves.

Regardless of its strategic importance, Singapore was seen as an ideal recruiting ground for one of the new naval units as it already possessed 'ardent yachtsmen' and 'fine waters in which naval training may be given'<sup>319</sup>. It was envisaged that the establishment of such a force and the associated training would provide benefits beyond the strategic defensive. It would be a moral force, which bound together an ethnically disparate society and fortified 'character' otherwise sapped by the inherent lethargy of the tropics:

Even a few hours on the water acts as a tonic, and weekends may be made wholesome on a Naval Volunteer cruise. Until a few years ago, the sea was curiously neglected by Singaporeans, but the Yacht Club which started bound almost at once into popularity, and it has become a source of delight.

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<sup>318</sup> Idem.

<sup>319</sup> Idem.

We believe that the proposed naval unit will be equally popular, once our tropical inertia has been overcome.<sup>320</sup>

It would be a further nine years, however, before the unit would finally be established, as the scheme became bogged down in legislative and financial wrangling. In September 1932, a question was raised in the legislative assembly by the Honourable Mr J. Bagnall over the real purpose for the proposed force; whether it was being created primarily to protect the naval base, whether this constituted an imperial rather than a local interest, and should it not therefore be funded by the British Government rather than the colony. It was argued that the idea of a RNVR unit had not been mooted before that of the naval base which was first announced in 1923, and that if the unit's conditional purpose were to prevent a "blockade of [Singapore's] waterways by hostile ships", then 'the real objective of a blockading force would be the paralysis of the Naval Base'. The RNVR's *raison d'être* was therefore inextricably tied to the base, and if the latter was 'not big enough to look after itself and at the same time provide protection of our food supplies, it is hardly likely that the task could be performed satisfactorily by an \$84,301 RNVR unit'<sup>321</sup>. The British desire to turn colonial thinking 'into active sympathy' with its idea of imperial defence was clearly still a lofty aspiration. Ultimately the decision rested with the Governor of the colony, and he refuted the notion that the scheme was linked to the naval base, saying that it concerned 'simply and solely the maintaining in times of emergency, of free passage to the Singapore harbour... a vital interest to this Colony and we all ought to be anxious to safeguard it'. He also argued that:

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<sup>320</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>321</sup> *Straits Times*, 27 and 28 September 1932, p.12 and p.10.

It is a very lamentable fact not greatly to our credit that we did not pay any contribution whatever to our defence by sea or air. We are content to allow the whole of the burden to fall upon the British taxpayer although everyone of you knows that he is more heavily burdened than we are. This service is intended for our use entirely... all steps that are in my opinion, necessary, and which are within my power, and can be afforded by the Colony, should be taken to safeguard our vital interests.<sup>322</sup>

## Race and Recruitment

On 20 April 1934, the Straits Settlements Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve (SSRNVR) was finally established, based in Singapore. Initially administered by the Army but trained by the Navy, the force began with a complement of 25 officers and 150 ratings, quickly growing to 50 officers and 200 ratings and still with a large waiting list of willing recruits. Initial training was conducted on the Governor's yacht, *Sea Belle II*, until 18 January 1935, when the *Acacia*-class sloop HMS *Laburnam* was formerly handed over to the force to act as its headquarters and drill ship. The officer-in-charge, Lieutenant-Commander L.A.W. Johnson, RN, had previously acted as chief of the Fishery Protection Gunboat, *Liffey*, and was accredited for his 'keenness and energy'<sup>323</sup>, at least officially. Unofficially, it was later stated within Admiralty and colonial circles that the appointment 'has not been altogether as successful as had

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<sup>322</sup> *Straits Times*, 19 October 1932, p.12.

<sup>323</sup> *Straits Times*, 7 December 1934, p.13.

been hoped', with Johnson being described as "tired"<sup>324</sup>, a problem perhaps inevitable given colonial reliance on retired naval officers. He was assisted by E.W. Hull, an ex-RN Chief Petty Officer and instructor at the torpedo school HMS *Vernon* in Portsmouth. The Army connection was strengthened by the loan of Sergeant Major Adnan Raji to the force from the Straits Settlements Volunteer Corps to act as drill instructor<sup>325</sup>, and he was the first Malay to be promoted to the rank of Chief Petty Officer<sup>326</sup>. The rest of the officers were Europeans, some with 'experience of nautical matters'<sup>327</sup>, though many were also 'merchants, brokers, planters and miners'<sup>328</sup>. They were trained to be thoroughly conversant in the subjects of pilotage, minesweeping, signals, mining and depth charges, gunnery, field training, and seamanship. The ratings were Malay, some possessing seagoing experience as fishermen or merchant seamen, although others were clerks, tambies<sup>329</sup> and motor engineers. The ratings were put through a four-year course similar to that of the officers, minus pilotage, and signalling was learnt by the signals section only.<sup>330</sup> Members of the unit were given the opportunity to embark on cruises aboard HMS *Terror*, the RN monitor stationed at the naval base, as well as other ships. These were designed not purely for practical experience, but also to 'promote social contacts, and generally to make this unit feel like the navy has taken the RNVR under its wing in no uncertain manner', and to promote 'esprit de corps and keenness' in the unit, not just among the officers stationed in Singapore, but also from visiting ships

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<sup>324</sup> TNA, CO 877/13/27, 'Vacancy for officer instructor in Hong Kong Naval Volunteer Force', 22 January 1937.

<sup>325</sup> TLDM (Royal Malaysian Navy) Museum, Malacca, 2 July 2009.

<sup>326</sup> Royal Malaysian Navy (ed.), *Honour and Sacrifice* (Kuala Lumpur, 1994), p.21.

<sup>327</sup> *Straits Times*, 7 December 1934, p.13.

<sup>328</sup> *Straits Times*, 28 December 1939, p.10.

<sup>329</sup> 'Tamby' is a Tamil word, being an endearing term for a younger brother, but since colonial times came to refer to Tamil office boys. As the ratings were uniformly Malay, it is assumed that this term was misused in the original source, and 'Ahmad', the term used for Malay office boys and chauffeurs, should perhaps have been used instead.

<sup>330</sup> *Straits Times*, 7 December 1934, p.13.



who themselves displayed 'the utmost helpfulness and friendliness towards the naval volunteers'<sup>331</sup>.

Despite a dominant Chinese population existing in Singapore, with significant Chinese communities spread across the Malay Peninsula, recruitment for ratings was restricted exclusively to the Malay population. Justification for this discriminatory policy lay in British assumptions of their nautical qualities. Malays were considered a 'seafaring people and along the coasts of the Peninsula there are hundreds of sturdy fishermen suitable for training'<sup>332</sup>. The reality that Malays were also recruited from inland and from non-maritime backgrounds indicates that seafaring aptitude was seen as being an innate racial quality, and like the British, who viewed themselves as the archetypal maritime race, this 'call of the sea' was something which was inherent along particular ethnic lines.

The early aspirations of using the SSRNVR as a force for social and moral change re-emerged when it was suggested that it could be utilised as an outlet in which to channel the colony's unemployed Malays:

...the pay is enough to satisfy the easy-going Malay (a dollar a day), the work suits him, the discipline also apparently suits him - very much better than anyone expected it would - and he likes the sea and boats and everything associated with them.<sup>333</sup>

The rhetoric of the argument is loaded with racial stereotypes, and illustrates colonial logic regarding the Malays' suitability for naval work. As well as an innate love of the sea, the stereotype of the 'lazy Malay' is also reflected in their 'easy-going'

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<sup>331</sup> *Straits Times*, 8 December 1935, p.2.

<sup>332</sup> *Straits Times*, 26 January 1937, p.11.

<sup>333</sup> *Straits Times*, 23 May 1937, p.2.

nature which dictates here that they could work for lower pay, and would less likely antagonise the chain of command, preserving the discipline of the force. The Chinese, by contrast, were seen as hard-working but commercially-orientated, and thus less likely to work for the lower wages. A report on the *Fighting Value of the Races of Malaya*, published in 1930 by the General Officer Commanding (GOC) Singapore, Major-General Harry Lionel Pritchard, had asserted that though the Chinese were intelligent, had initiative, enterprise, determination and persistence, they only displayed 'fighting value' when it was for personal gain, as demonstrated when 'Chinese burglars stood up well in their brushes with the police'<sup>334</sup>. Whereas Malays 'could be relied on to be loyal to their Sultans', the British had doubts over Chinese political loyalties, both towards the Kuomintang, and the Communists whose egalitarian ideology ran counter to notions of naval/military hierarchy and discipline. There was also concern over the influence Chinese secret societies wielded. Of the Indians in Malaya, it was thought that 'one cannot make soldiers out of Tamils'. Though Sikhs were proven fighters, they were also considered 'well-known intriguers by nature', while Sikh policemen had been 'passively disloyal' when a Punjabi Muslim battalion mutinied in Singapore in 1915.<sup>335</sup>

The SSRNVR's discriminatory recruitment policy drew criticism from the Eurasian community, with the issue becoming politicised and adopted by Eurasians to highlight their wider campaign for greater political and social representation:

...the Eurasian position is tragic, due to the fact that we are brought up in European environment, with European traditions and living standards. As a rule we are not an agricultural race, so we cannot go back to the land, as

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<sup>334</sup> Quoted in McIntyre, *The Rise and Fall of the Singapore Naval Base, 1919-1942*, p.225.

<sup>335</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.225-6.

some suggest. Neither do we get a dole... The pro-Malay policy in Malaya as a whole has crushed our hopes, and we are being entirely "cabined". Our Malacca lads would jump at the chance, if given the opportunity to enrol in the navy or the RNVR, as they are on par with the Malays, where the sea is concerned, having come from a long line of seafaring forebears.<sup>336</sup>

Though the GOC's report believed that the Eurasians in Malaya were better than those in India, their martial ability varied greatly; the 'cross with Chinese' was considered better than with Malays, and while the best type of Eurasian could 'almost' be on a par with pure British, the worst were 'quite useless for any purpose'<sup>337</sup>. Seafaring ancestry here was not enough to qualify Eurasians as a 'seagoing race'. In fact, their very lack of legislative recognition as a distinct 'race' was why they were fighting for greater rights. Whereas groups recruited in other areas of the Empire, such as Cayman Islanders, were similar to Eurasians in possessing European ancestry with some seafaring tradition, Caymanians had a separate culture developed in comparative isolation over a couple of centuries, distinct enough from that of the British so that a sense of 'otherness' and racial difference prevailed. This was not so clear in the case of Eurasians, who for the majority were only a couple of generations separated from their British heritage, and possessed similar customs though they were perceived as racially 'other'. They served as troubling reminders to British administrators about the dangers of 'going native' and the dilution of British racial stock. Furthermore, in the hierarchy of the Navy, they would have distorted the relationship between class and colour which

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<sup>336</sup> *Straits Times*, 25 May 1937, p.12.

<sup>337</sup> Quoted in McIntyre, p.225.

demarcated the chain of command and reinforced the authority of the European officer class. By refusing to provide legislative recognition or cultural validity to Eurasian ethnic identity, both within the Malay Navy and the broader colony itself, it helped maintain the illusion of British racial superiority, and the imperial hegemony that went with that.

Consequently, despite external pressures, even as the force expanded, recruitment policies remained the same and focused around European officers and Malay crew, most of whom possessed lower levels of education from local English schools. As of March 1937 several officers trained in Singapore began to be stationed in Penang and were known as 'list 2 officers'<sup>338</sup>. These formed the nucleus of a second SSRNVR unit created and based there from October 1938, which was soon renamed as the Malayan Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve (MRNVR). The force's membership grew from 20 officers and 100 ratings, to 650 ratings and 158 British officers on the eve of the Second World<sup>339</sup>. When war broke out on 4 September 1939, the officers and ratings of both RNVR forces were released from their civilian occupations and mobilised for full-time service for the duration of hostilities. Unlike the experiences of the TRNVR, officers and ratings received the same rate of pay as their counterparts in the Royal Navy<sup>340</sup>.

On the same date, under the auspices of the Admiralty and the Ministry of War Transport, a large-scale programme of requisition and modification was embarked upon involving merchant vessels of Singapore, Malayan and Hong Kong shipping companies, most notably the Straits Steamship Company. By 1941, 51 trading

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<sup>338</sup> *Straits Times*, 6 March 1937, p.13.

<sup>339</sup> TLDM (Royal Malaysian Navy) Museum, Malacca, 2 July 2009.

<sup>340</sup> *Straits Times*, 28 December 1939, p.10.

vessels had been commissioned into the SSRNVR as His Majesty's Ships (HMS), equipped with cannons, Lewis guns, depth charges, and minesweepers.<sup>341</sup> These ships retained their original crews, which included some Chinese, and their Malay 'serang'<sup>342</sup>. Their captains were given temporary commissions in the SSRNVR, and the flag of the line was replaced by the white ensign<sup>343</sup>. "Korang" and "lebeh" became the two most common words on the bridge of an SSRNVR minesweeper, as the CO sent instructions in Malay to the engine room to either speed up or slow down<sup>344</sup>.

In addition to the RNVR units, in 1939 a full-time Royal Navy (Malay Section) was formed to release some of the European RN personnel for service elsewhere, known colloquially as the 'Malay Navy', and based at Singapore in HMS *Pelandok*<sup>345</sup>. The force was again open exclusively to Malays, aged between 15 and 20 years old. Higher educational standards were required for joining, with those possessing Malay School Standard Five entering the Marine Branch, and those with Senior/Junior Cambridge or Standard Seven at English schools entering the Telegraphy branch. Seamen under training were paid \$28 a month, rising to \$45 a month for a petty officer. Engine room personnel received a higher wage, from \$40 for stokers to \$90 for chief engineers.<sup>346</sup> The men were issued with 'smart and effective shore uniforms - white shirt and coat, blue and gold sarong and black cap', which were seen as 'a never-ending source of pride' that appealed to prospective recruits<sup>347</sup>. Recruitment posters and notices were published in the local press and issued at District offices

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<sup>341</sup> TLDM (Royal Malaysian Navy) Museum, Malacca, 2 July 2009.

<sup>342</sup> 'Boatswain'.

<sup>343</sup> *Straits Times*, 28 December 1939, p.10.

<sup>344</sup> *Straits Times*, 21 February 1940, p.10.

<sup>345</sup> 'Pelandok' is Malay for 'mouse deer', a creature native to the peninsula and a favourite character in Malayan folk tales.

<sup>346</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>347</sup> *Straits Times*, 28 September 1940, p.11.

throughout the country<sup>348</sup>. By the end of 1939, around 400 Malays, drawn from Singapore, Sarawak and Peninsula Malaya, were serving in the Malay Navy, growing to 800 men the following year, and 1,430 by the end of 1941<sup>349</sup>, with thousands more on the waiting list<sup>350</sup>. The force's popularity amongst Malay volunteers was again attributed to their seagoing nature:

The sea attracts the Malay like water does a duck. He joined the SSRNVR when the call for volunteers came - and he and his friends are still joining. Last September, there were whispers in the Bazaars and the Kampongs that Malays would be wanted in a unit of their own in the RN. Before the naval authorities in Singapore could fully appreciate the work of the whispers, they were inundated with applications.<sup>351</sup>

Malays were framed in traditional culturally stereotypical terms here, and once more it was argued that such naval forces played a role not purely for external defence, but also as outlets for elevating Malays out of positions of oriental stagnation into becoming productive members of society:

It is another step towards employing the "sons of the soil" in the defence of their own country. First there was the Malay Regiment. Then - as a venture, one might say - came the SSRNVR which confirmed the belief that coffee-shop loungers and office peons could be turned into good

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<sup>348</sup> *Tentera Laut Diraja Malaysia: 55 Tahun - Royal Malaysian Navy: 55 Years* (Kuala Lumpur, 1990), p.20.

<sup>349</sup> TLDM (Royal Malaysian Navy) Museum, Malacca, 2 July 2009.

<sup>350</sup> *Straits Times*, 28 September 1940, p.11.

<sup>351</sup> *Idem*.

sailors, and that in the country there was plenty of material that could be absorbed into the RN proper.<sup>352</sup>

The Navy was seen as a transformational force, not merely a social one, but also a cultural one, simultaneously and subliminally reinforcing the validity of the imperial project, civilising mission, and the British right to rule. Under British tutelage, the traditional image of the 'lounger' or 'lazy Malay' thus became transformed into that of an alert, dedicated professional sailor:

On a visit to HMS *Pelandok* yesterday, we saw the ratings at their training, noticed the concentrated looks on their faces as they listened to lectures on boxing, the compass, anchor and cable work, and the rule of the road at sea; watched their nimble fingers making bends and hitches and splicing wires; heard the dots and dashes of an electronic "buzzer" as they were being taught signalling and telegraphy, and appreciated their quickness at the guns.<sup>353</sup>

By April 1940 five Malays, aged between 21 and 31, had passed out as leading seamen to become instructors and were being trained as Petty Officers. These men were used to illustrate the progress of the force and illustrate how it was 'beginning to fulfil the policy of the Admiralty that all instruction will be given by Malays', though the European officers would remain in advisory and administrative capacities. The most senior of these men, Hashim bin Karim, had been a policeman for three years before joining the Malay Navy in September 1939, and previous to that he had served aboard a merchant ship. When asked whether he would stay in

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<sup>352</sup> Idem.

<sup>353</sup> Idem.

the RN he replied: "Of course I'll sign up for another year, and another, and another". Another of the five was Ali bin Ibrahim, who had also been a merchant seaman since 1936, and was awarded the Royal Humane Society medal for rescuing the ship's storekeeper when he fell overboard on one voyage to Liverpool. Acting Petty Officer Haroun, an ex-railway guard who had served in the SSRNVR for a number of years, professed his sense of duty and imperial loyalty in that: "We in these ships are doing our best to help to win the war, and of course, we will win. We are all united, aren't we!"<sup>354</sup>

One volunteer, Mohamed Haji bin Yunos was a clerk in the Singapore Municipality when he was mobilized on the outbreak of war in Europe. In the early months he was attached to a minesweeper, work he described as "hard and long hours", but nevertheless, he added, "I and my brother are proud to be of service to our king and country"<sup>355</sup>. Like PO Haroun, this could be interpreted as an expression of imperial allegiance, yet it could be interrogated further by questioning to which king was Haji referring? After all, only the Straits Settlements of Singapore, Malacca and Penang technically had British crown colony status. The Malay states were tied to Britain by treaties and retained their own Sultans, who continued to act as Malaya's religious leaders with complete authority over Islamic matters. The Sultans themselves had forged links with the Navy, being 'deeply sensible of the benefits of British protection' and desiring to 'express their loyalty in some tangible form', they had paid for the construction of the *Queen Elizabeth*-class battleship, HMS *Malaya*, in 1913 'with a view to the strengthening of the British Empire and maintaining her

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<sup>354</sup> *Straits Times*, 21 February 1940, p.10.

<sup>355</sup> *Straits Times*, 28 December 1939, p.10.



naval supremacy<sup>356</sup>. The fact that Haji adopts such linguistic iconography as that old British adage of 'king and country', even if he was simply parroting the phrase, indicates an assimilation of British discourse and cultural hegemony. In this context, a conception of both 'king' and 'country' is misleading and culturally displaced. For not only were there multiple monarchs competing for Malay loyalty, but Singapore was not technically a political entity in its own right, being but one part of the Straits Settlements, never mind a unified country or nation, with competing ethnic identities superseding any nascent sense of 'Singaporeanness' at this time. Such an identity, it can be argued, wasn't properly articulated until the late 1960s after the city-state's ejection from Malaysia. Instead Singapore was a place of conflicting ethnic allegiances.

## **The Second World War**

The most famous, or perhaps infamous, naval action involving Singapore during the Second World War was arguably the sinking of the HMS *Prince of Wales* and HMS *Repulse* on the 10 December 1941. Much has been written about Churchill's decision to send just two capital ships, one an un-modernised First World War battlecruiser with light armour and the other a battleship only just commissioned without a proper work-up, with no cruiser or aircraft carrier escort, to act as a deterrent to the much larger Japanese fleet. The mythology of the Royal Navy's superiority, coupled with racial preconceptions regarding Asiatic peoples, influenced

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<sup>356</sup> H.C. Ferraby, *The Imperial British Navy* (London, 1918), p.91.

the underestimation of the threat posed by the Imperial Japanese Navy. The sinking of 'Force Z' led Churchill to later proclaim "In all the war, I never received a more direct shock... As I turned over and twisted in bed the full horror of the news sank in upon me... Over all this vast expanse of waters Japan was supreme, and we everywhere were weak and naked"<sup>357</sup>. With Japan able to operate with complete impunity in both the skies and sea-lanes, Singapore surrendered to the Japanese on 15 February 1942, prompting Churchill to label it the "worst disaster" and "largest capitulation in British history". This is the popular memory surrounding the fall of Singapore, in what has become a watershed for postcolonial nationalist historiography in general; the British Empire had been defeated by an Asian power, shattering British 'prestige' and illusions of superiority.

Although Singapore is popularly remembered, at least in the West, for this 'capitulation' and the embarrassment suffered by Britain and the Royal Navy, it does in fact have interesting parallels with Dunkirk, another defeat, but one which is conversely remembered as a moment of national heroism and celebration. Immediately after the war, the *Straits Times* published numerous articles celebrating the wartime exploits of its local military forces, including the naval forces. Like those at Dunkirk, these men were praised for their efforts in helping evacuees, first from Penang, and then from Singapore in its final hours, for which they paid a high price; only nine out of 61 MRNVR ships managed to break through the enemy cordon to reach Sumatra and Java, with the rest being sunk by the Japanese fleet and air force.<sup>358</sup> Around 41 MRNVR officers died or were Missing-In-Action (MIA), 49 were taken prisoner, and only 30 got away. In total MRNVR officers won 10 Distinguished

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<sup>357</sup> Winston Churchill, *The Grand Alliance* (London, 1950), p.487.

<sup>358</sup> *Tentera Laut Diraja Malaysia: 55 Tahun*, p.77.

Service Crosses (DSC), one Distinguished Service Order (DSO), and eight mentions in dispatches. Of the Malay ratings, it is known that 53 were Killed-in-Action (KIA), 120 were MIA, with around 500 recovered.<sup>359</sup> These were depicted locally as 'acts of bravery and devotion which make us humble at the thought that we are beneficiaries of such sacrifice'<sup>360</sup>, and contradict Western representations of the battle.

Dahim Ahmad bin Noordin joined the Malay Navy as a signaller in October 1941. His opinion of the retreat from Dunkirk when it was relayed to Malaya was that it was 'terrible', at odds with images of the 'disaster turned triumph'<sup>361</sup> and 'miracle of Dunkirk', that Churchill perpetuated in Britain. The collective anaesthesia that the 'Dunkirk spirit' served for the British did not seem to extend to Malays. Here there was no semantic illusion; it was plain and simple defeat. Despite this, it did not shake Ahmad's sense of imperial patriotism. He clearly displayed pro-British sympathies, and he promptly joined the Malay Navy, expressing the opinion that, 'I just wanted to join, that's why, stood for something, that so wrong? Rather than be a civilian, I know in war time civilians suffer'<sup>362</sup>. The prestige of the service and the grander cause clearly appealed ('stood for something'), but also to Ahmad, civilian life during wartime held more fears than being in the military. He was not so much worried about the consequences of war as he was a 'bachelor'. This was seen as a desirable trait within the Navy, who wanted men who would 'not pine, and whose total disappearance for months on end is no cause for distress'<sup>363</sup>. His Cambridge English Certificate, of which he said his naval interviewer was impressed, qualified Ahmad to

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<sup>359</sup> *Straits Times*, 7 July 1946, p.4.

<sup>360</sup> *Straits Times*, 12 February 1950, p.8

<sup>361</sup> *The Times*, 6 June 1940, p.5.

<sup>362</sup> Interview with Ahmad, Dahim bin Noordin, conducted by Dr. Daniel Chew, 1 November 1991, accession number 001318, reel 2, OHC, Singapore.

<sup>363</sup> 'The Age of Entry of Naval Cadets', *Naval Review*, Vol.8 (1920), pp.535-38, p.538.

join, though beyond this the interview did not seem too stringent and offers an insight into recruiting methods through peer pressure:

They didn't ask much, only they look at the certificate, they say "you like to join the navy", "yeah, I like to join the navy", "oh that's good"... I accepted, and they said "why don't you call your friends to join?"<sup>364</sup>

Ahmad recalled his training lasting between three to four months, and after two months war with Japan broke out, at which point he received 'training to kill, to shoot, to use the bayonet'. According to Ahmad, the British officers treated the Malays 'alright, so far, at that time, though it was years ago, no discrimination... but still discipline', at which he explained that they had to be back at the barracks at seven o'clock sharp or they would be punished.

There appeared to be a real belief in Britain's supposed military superiority, with Ahmad expressing his confidence at the time that they would defend Singapore because there so many troops were stationed there, mostly from India, though he described the British and Australian troops as 'raw'. Ahmad's confidence was inevitably shaken by the sinking of HMS *Prince of Wales* and HMS *Repulse*, and he met some of the survivors at the naval base when the destroyers brought them in:

We were shocked, because, we read in the papers a few weeks before the outbreak of the war, according to Mr Churchill, British pride of the navy, the *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse*, unsinkable.<sup>365</sup>

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<sup>364</sup> Interview with Ahmad, Dahim bin Noordin, conducted by Dr. Daniel Chew, 1 November 1991, accession number 001318, reel 2, OHC, Singapore.

<sup>365</sup> Interview with Ahmad, Dahim bin Noordin, conducted by Dr. Daniel Chew, 5 March 1992, accession number 001318, reel 3, OHC, Singapore.

HMS *Prince of Wales* was also nicknamed HMS 'Unsinkable'. This hegemonic myth was clearly internalised by Ahmad and his fellow Malay ratings. The *Prince of Wales* was more than a ship; it was the technological manifestation of the British Empire's professed cultural superiority. Its sinking thus not only undermined Churchill's, and more broadly Britain's imperial self-assurance; it also shook colonial faith in it.

At this time Ahmad did not go to sea. Instead he was engaged with filling sandbags for defence, working alongside Australian troops placing granite rocks on the airfield so enemy planes could not land, and carrying out guard duties at military installations around the island. Despite this, he says 'we were not even given [a] weapon to defend ourselves because we were naval personnel not soldiers'. When the Malay Navy barracks were damaged by Japanese bombers, Ahmad and his fellow full-time ratings ended up sleeping alongside the naval volunteers in HMS *Laburnam*, the SSRNVR's headquarters at Telok Ayer Basin. When the call to evacuate Singapore was put out on 10 February 1942, Lieutenant-Commander H. Vickers, R.N., the Malay Navy Commanding Officer, gave his men a choice; either to stay in Singapore with their families or following the British in leaving Singapore. Ahmad decided to leave with the British, more out of fear than loyalty:

I was really scared because if the Japanese capture us and find out we were former members of a naval unit, maybe they will take us as POWs or maybe kill us. You heard stories of Japanese brutality in China. So I left the others.<sup>366</sup>

Ahmad left aboard a transport with European women and children, and around 40 other Malay ratings. During the crossing to Jakarta, they came under attack and were

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<sup>366</sup> Idem.

immobilised, forcing them to abandon ship and land on Bangka Island, where they were taken prisoner and Ahmad was forced to do work on the airfield. On the second day, as he was forced to carry ammunition cases across the island, Ahmad managed to escape when after two or three kilometres he feigned a toilet break and darted off into the bushes. After four months on the run, he moved to a town where he ended up working for the military administration. After two and a half years he requested to go to Jakarta in order to join the Japanese Navy. This was no casual transfer of allegiance, but an elaborate plan to return home. After attending the navigation school there for eight months, Ahmad joined a Japanese rice cargo ship on its way to Singapore. Upon reaching Singapore he posed as a 'coolie' working in the ship, got past security, and returned to his mother's house where he saw out the rest of the war. Upon Britain's return, Ahmad rejoined the Malay Navy, typing signals until April 1947 when the force was disbanded.

British imperialism in Malaya relied on collaboration with the Sultans. British administrators believed this relationship ensured the loyalty of the Malay population. Yet, Malays did not all conform to stereotyped colonial paradigms, some renounced the adat, Malay custom, which society imposed on them along with the traditional hierarchies that it reinforced. Anti-establishment sentiment was thus not only aimed at the colonial authorities, it was also expressed towards their Sultan allies, as trustees of adat and the Islamic religion which served as a mechanism for social control. Naval loyalty was thus more ambiguous in such instances. One example of this was Rahman Abdul bin Ya'acob, who served in the local RNVR during the War, though he was drafted rather than being a volunteer at the outset. He had been educated in an English school, which he described as 'broad minded', and his father

had also been educated in English to a high standard. At around the age of fourteen, Abdul began to develop anti-establishment feelings, both towards the British and the Malay Sultans, not agreeing that one had 'to raise two hands to pray to thee', despite being religious:

I don't like the way they treat Asians, see, whatever they did was right, and these Asians, we had to bow to them... People respect them because they think that the Sultans and the British people are divine, which I never think that. I think that only God is divine.<sup>367</sup>

Abdul left home without telling his father for fear of being caned, and went to the shipping office in Penang. At the time, it was apparently easy to get a job aboard a ship as 'nobody want to work as a sailor because people look down upon sailors'. Aboard the ship Abdul was bullied by other sailors because of his education, and though the Captain apparently respected his ability to speak English, it was also balanced by distrust:

I cannot go near the chart room because I understand English I might learn something from there, they are very selfish, the Captain and the officers.<sup>368</sup>

The officers were all European, beneath whom the Hainanese and Malay sailors were considered 'lower class'.

In 1941, Abdul was working as a quartermaster aboard a Straits Company steamship when it was requisitioned and mobilised into the MRNVR. Abdul says 'we

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<sup>367</sup> Interview with Rahman Abdul bin Ya'acob, conducted by Dr Daniel Chew, 5 July 1994, accession number 001527, reel 1, OHC, Singapore.

<sup>368</sup> *Idem*.

didn't know the reason at the time so much because we are still not on the know side, maybe war, or nothing, whatever it was were kept secret<sup>369</sup>. The ship's officers were given naval officer training. The vessel was fitted with a small gun, operated as an examination vessel out of Penang, and conducted patrol duties. Whereas beforehand, their voyages would take them to Burma, Thailand, and the Nicobar Islands, within the MRNVR they were confined to local waters only.

Abdul did not mind the strict discipline of the ship, describing it as a 'free life' comparatively. It represented escapism, from the more repressive elements he had left back home, such as his father's brutality and the idolised worship of the Sultans. Most deckhands were Malay, with the engine room (greasers), cooks, and 'boys' (stewards) Chinese. According to Abdul, the Malays and Chinese aboard were 'very co-operative'; they were bound together by the same life as sailors which distinguished them from 'shore people'<sup>370</sup>, and forged a group identity which transcended ethnicity and religion.

The men mostly ate European food, which included plenty of meat. Abdul never questioned whether it was pork or not; 'we just say "as long as we don't know"... sailors at that time we don't care much about the food, whether halal or not, we just eat what is served'<sup>371</sup>. Similarly, Islamic customs regarding alcohol and prayer were not always observed:

I was brought up very strict so I never touched alcohol, although some sailors did drink when they go ashore. Sometimes when you have an

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<sup>369</sup> Ibid., reel 2.

<sup>370</sup> Idem.

<sup>371</sup> Idem.



opportunity you pray, if you don't have, you don't pray. No special time or places to pray.<sup>372</sup>

As there was no modern equipment such as radar or gyroscope, they had to rely solely on their eyes and ears to guide the ship. It was seen as a 'brave' life, going out to face the unpredictable and often tempestuous dangers of the sea, and for Abdul, formed an important part of their identity. What little free time they had was spent 'resting, sleeping, joking about, that's all, we never do anything much because it's a small ship'.

Soon after the Japanese declared war Abdul's ship was bombed and the crew were forced to abandon her. They then helped the European civilians evacuate Penang in another ship to Singapore. After the Singapore invasion Abdul and some of his fellow sailors were caught by the Japanese:

I was arrested by the Japanese, and after being questioned, tortured for a while, taught how to respect the Japanese soldiers and so on... after hammering, slapping, kicking, then told how to bow to the Japanese, and then we were released. We are helpless, and to me, torturing, all these things, I ever had getting from my father.<sup>373</sup>

Some of Abdul's friends were subjected to water torture, though not he. When they were interrogated the questions would be asked exclusively in Japanese, except on occasion to say 'British, Britisher, slave to the British'. Despite these efforts to undermine his spirit and loyalty, when the war ended Abdul rejoined the RNVR in

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<sup>372</sup> Idem.

<sup>373</sup> Abdul makes reference here to the violence he experienced at the hands of his father, one of his motivations for running off to join the navy, idem.

Singapore. He was restricted to carrying out 'odd jobs' ashore, however, something he was not happy about, and so in 1946 he left the force to return to Penang.

## Exile in Ceylon

In 1941, the Singapore-based SSRNVR was itself renamed as the MRNVR so that both reserve forces now fell under the same banner<sup>374</sup>. With the fall of British Malaya and Singapore, the MRNVR was disbanded, and its surviving officers were transferred to the 'Imperial RNVR' with effect from 1 March 1942, with a number seeing service as part of the Eastern Fleet. The bulk of the remaining Malay ratings, around 300, were engaged on non-continuous service (N.C.S.) in Ceylon, consisting mainly of port duties, although several also found service in East Africa, India, and Australia.<sup>375</sup> Those men who escaped the Japanese occupation suddenly found themselves in exile, and the treatment that they received, both morally and physically, only served to heighten their sense of alienation. In June 1943 rumours emerged of dissatisfaction among the men of the Malay Navy and MRNVR based in Ceylon. This was investigated by Mr C.D. Ahearne, Colonial Office Representative in India, and Political Secretary to the Commander in Chief Mr E.A. Ross of the Malayan Civil Service:

There was a spirit of discouragement and depression amongst them caused by a feeling that they were being unfairly treated and were friendless exiles in a foreign country. They mentioned that the promises

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<sup>374</sup> TNA, ADM 1/12995, Straits Settlements Defence (R.N.V.R.) Regulations, 1941.

<sup>375</sup> TNA, ADM 1/12995, 1 September 1943.

made to them when they were recruited had not been kept and they compared their conditions with those of the CRNVR and the Dutch Malay ratings.<sup>376</sup>

Specifically, the men possessed grievances relating to the colonial and overseas allowance they received, their kit allowance, and the fact that they had to travel third class when the local Ceylon RNVR (CRNVR) ratings were allowed to travel second class. In response, the kit and travel complaints were resolved, and a small increase of pay was granted. Despite this, it was said by Lieutenant Ramsden, who was in charge of the Malay naval men from April 1942 to March 1943, that the main trouble was 'internal':

The men feel they have been abandoned and the position has been made worse by the arrival of four Malay RNVR men from Australia. The RNVR people who got to the country were all billeted in private houses. One married an Australian girl and deserted. Four came on to Colombo. They had lost all sense of naval discipline and had even abandoned their Malay adat.

As Abdul earlier attested, Malay custom was subordinated to the demands of the service in regards to eating and drinking habits and time allotted for prayer, thus eroding away at Malay identity. From March 1943, the men were moved from separate houses into barracks first under the charge of Warrant Officer (WO) Toms, but who had no previous experience of Malays and so was replaced by WO Baigent. Baigent did not speak Malay, though he had been an RNVR instructor at HMS *Laburnam* in Singapore and identified with the RNVR men, who were seen by

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<sup>376</sup> TNA, CO 968/145/5, 'Notes on visit to Ceylon', Item 50.

Ramsden as 'the bad hats of the group'. Despite their shared ethnicity, the Malays who found themselves on Ceylon were not considered a homogenous group; there was an old feud between the MRNVR and the Malay Navy in Singapore which had resulted in a stabbing affray. Baigent had apparently fallen under the influence of one of the RNVR men from Australia, Ismail, who alone spoke English, undermining the authority of the Malay Navy Petty Officers. According to Ramsden, some Malay Navy men, who were generally younger, were 'afraid to sleep in their beds and slipped outside to take their rest and thus avoid possibilities of being victimised'<sup>377</sup>.

Ramsden suggested that as a solution, the 52 Malay Navy seamen at the Barracks should be sent to the American forces on Ceylon; however, Ahearne and Ross dismissed this as 'politically dangerous'. Among the Americans was a Lt. Meade, formerly a Police Inspector in the Straits Settlements Police Force before becoming an American citizen. It was suspected that Meade was trying 'to create a nucleus of Malays who would form a spearhead of American influence on our return to Malaya'. Such an arrangement would also risk creating further dissatisfaction by any comparison with the pay drawn by American and Dutch East Indies personnel, as the latter received four times what the British Malays were paid.

Having proceeded to the barracks, Ahearne was told by its Commanding Officer, Captain Harris, that 'under Lt. Ramsden discipline had been lax. They had to be moved into the barracks and since the move they had altered beyond all recognition and are now one of the smartest divisions'. After being presented with what Ahearne considered 'the finest body of Malay youths I have ever seen', over a dozen men were questioned, among whom only one, Abu Othman, said that

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<sup>377</sup> Ibid., Item 51.

'relations between the two bodies outside the barracks were not cordial. Others said they were all friends with no distinction between them and another said "they were all like relations"'. The one great complaint was that wages were not enough and that if they married locally they would need a family allowance. One of Ramsden's so-called 'bad hats', Karim, also complained that the meat was 'not killed according to Mohamedan custom', prompting Ross to explain that 'owing to rinderpest in India goat was not obtainable'<sup>378</sup>.

One seaman, 'a very good looking lad' named Ismail bin Haji Othman of Kuala Lumpur, had been a clerk in the health office in Klang when he was drafted in as a telegraphist:

He said he was fed up with the service. He had no hope if he remained on.

He would like to get out and get another job of any kind whatever. He had no trouble with any other men, he was just sick of life. He was obviously in a miserable state of melancholia.

Ismail had been put on light duties and kept under observation, but a release from the Navy into local employment was not seen as a cure, as 'the lad would be without relatives and be deprived of the friends he had now'. The doctor claimed that there were 'a bigger percentage of such cases amongst the Malays than amongst the Europeans as their mental background was not sufficient to enable them to stand up to the strains imposed on them'. Furthermore, 'a case of attempted suicide recently was due to the development of religious mania'. These medical opinions were influenced by the pseudo-scientific colonial belief that 'Malays were, as a whole, capable of developing a psycho-pathological disorder called *latah*', and 'any Malay is

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<sup>378</sup> Ibid. Item 52.

capable of developing into a typical case of *latah* if he is sufficiently persecuted, teased, and harassed<sup>379</sup>. *Latah* is a culture-based syndrome particular to Malaya and Indonesia, in which some Malays when exposed to certain pressures, sudden noise, shock or fright, will lose their self-control and fall into a trance-like or hysteric state, shouting obscenities, imitating words, gestures or actions, and unable to recognise their own identity. Writing on *latah*, in this case naval medical reports, 'created and perpetuated images of mental deficiency of the Malayan Other, which justified and encouraged European domination'<sup>380</sup>, and reinforced Orientalist discourse.

In response to this, Ahearne recommended the secondment of 'a good Malay speaking officer to act in the capacity of welfare officer'. He also arranged for Ismail's transfer to Delhi, 'where there is plenty of Malay company', to be employed in his old role as a clerk. In addition, the pay for Malay seaman was brought to a level more in line with the CRNVR, promotion opportunities were improved with the creation of an additional Malay post of Chief Petty Officer, a Marriage and Children's Allowance Scheme was introduced for those ratings married and supporting a wife outside of Malaya, and a daily food allowance was introduced with the ratings doing their own catering. Lt. Ramsden's allegations were largely discounted, and a report filed by Captain Harris concluded that 'the Malays are a happy contented and loyal body of men... all the Malays expressed their willingness to serve in the Imperial Forces till the end of the war'<sup>381</sup>. It was emphasised separately by both the Admiralty and Colonial Office 'the importance from the political point of view of ensuring that the

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<sup>379</sup> Syed Hussein Alatas, *The Myth of the Lazy Native: A Study of the Image of Malays, Filipinos and Javanese from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and its Function in the Ideology of Colonial Capitalism* (London, 1977), p.48.

<sup>380</sup> Robert L. Winzler, *Latah in Southeast Asia: The history and ethnography of a culture-bound syndrome* (Cambridge, 1995), p.3.

<sup>381</sup> TNA, CO 968/145/5, 'Notes on visit to Ceylon', Item 52.

men return to Malaya with good opinion of their treatment under British protection in Ceylon<sup>382</sup>.

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<sup>382</sup> TNA, CO 968/145/5, Admiralty to C. in C. Eastern Fleet, Item 59, and Sabban-Clare to Fox, 10 June 1944, Item 64.

## Part Two: Post-Second World War

### The British Return to Malaya

As early as September 1943, discussions took place within the Admiralty regarding the potential reconstitution of the MRNVR and utilisation of the core of Malay ratings based in Ceylon for the re-occupation of Malaya. By April 1944, it was assumed that 'sooner or later the ports of British Malaya will be in our hands', and that as Malay was the 'lingua franca' over a great part of the East Indies it was considered the necessary medium for any contact with 'Asiatics' ashore. Furthermore, the establishment of 'patriot forces' such as the MRNVR served a useful propaganda role, and 'the revival of this Force should be a particularly valuable contribution to associating the inhabitants of Malaya with the turn of the tide, and to easing our own position on re-occupation'<sup>383</sup>. This clearly displays a distinct unease from the British as to how their return would be greeted locally, a microcosm for much larger concerns regarding the reestablishment of the Empire in the post-war climate. Consequently, 'the presence of other (Naval trained) Asiatics in a British party ought to be a great advantage to any N.O.I.C. [Naval Officer In Command] or senior officer landed, in his dealings with the inhabitants'<sup>384</sup>. Such Malay RNVR men were not to be employed simply as "hands" like before, but elevated to act as 'orderlies, tallymen, piermasters, interpreters with local labour, or even in offices'. Among the suggestions was the possible recruitment from the small Malay colonies established in the Cape,

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<sup>383</sup> TNA, ADM 1/12995, E.E. Sabban-Clare to M.J. Fox, 27 July 1943.

<sup>384</sup> TNA, ADM 1/12995, A.H. Phillips, Director of Local Defence, 26 April 1944.



however, this was discouraged because 'it is understood the Union Government are not in favour of recruiting "natives" in the armed forces'<sup>385</sup>. Despite this, in a marked shift from previous recruitment policies, it was emphasised that the reconstituted MRNVR should be open to all the races of the peninsula 'without discrimination':

It would appeal as a patriotic rallying point to all in Malaya and not simply the British oriental subjects resident in the Straits Settlements. The active cooperation and goodwill of the coastal Malays and Chinese will we assume be important to attract.<sup>386</sup>

Ultimately, the Japanese surrendered before Operation Zipper, the codename for the British 'liberation' of Malaya, ever took place. After helping facilitate the British return to Malaya and Singapore, the briefly reformed MRNVR was disbanded on 26 February 1946 due to financial burdens, with the Malay Navy following suit a year later on 11 March 1947<sup>387</sup>.

It was not long before this situation once again changed, with the declaration of a state of Emergency in Malaya on 16 June 1948. This led to the creation on 24 December 1948 of a new full-time unit, the Malayan Naval Force (MNF), based in Woodlands Barracks and adjoining the Royal Naval Base at Sembawang, Singapore. The MNF was placed under the command of former Malay Navy officer, Captain H.E.H. Nicholls, and composed of previous Malay Navy members and new recruits. Having been born in Sungei Lembing, Pahang State, Nicholls spoke fluent Malay, but was considered an 'absolute misogynist' as a result of a failed first marriage and he thus preferred his officers to be unmarried. Of course the notion of the 'bachelor

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<sup>385</sup> TNA, ADM 1/12995, C.C. Hughes-Hallett, Director of Plans, 5 May 1944.

<sup>386</sup> TNA, ADM 1/12995, E.E. Sabban-Clare to M.J. Fox, 27 July 1943.

<sup>387</sup> TNA, CO 537/2534, 'Malayan Naval Forces', 8 August 1947, Item 26.

officer' was one which was longstanding in the Navy and encouraged by the fact that an officer would not receive marriage allowance or accommodation unless over the age of 28. It was remarked that Nicholls used his supreme authority to run the MNF as a personal 'fiefdom'<sup>388</sup>. He had had his 'Super Porpoise' shipped out to Singapore, and he kept one MNF rating permanently attached to the yacht, responsible for keeping it impeccably clean and readying the boat for whenever he wished to go sailing. Among the social activities of the force were the regular sailing races that were held, and Nicholls would get 'terribly upset' if he did not win<sup>389</sup>.

The pragmatic realities of the Emergency were to force an ideological shift in the Navy's restrictive pre-war recruitment practices. This resulted in a concerted effort on the part of the British to recruit more Chinese into the armed forces, so as to offset the Communist insurgents by drawing the Malayan Chinese closer to the state.<sup>390</sup> As has been previously highlighted, however, discussion had taken place much earlier within the Admiralty on integrating the Chinese population into the local naval forces. They had recognised the importance of acquiring 'the active cooperation and goodwill of the coastal Malays and Chinese' in order to help ease the British return to Malaya and reassert their formal control. Yet, in attempting to stabilise British power through seeking the favour of the Chinese community, fractures were created with the Malay population; the Admiralty's moves drew opposition from the Malay-language newspaper *Utusan Melayu*, which argued that the defence forces of Malaya should consist of Malays only.<sup>391</sup> Despite these protestations the British pressed on with their recruitment plans and by July 1953 the

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<sup>388</sup> Interview conducted by author with Peter Fosten on 14 August 2009.

<sup>389</sup> Ibid.

<sup>390</sup> Cynthia H. Enloe, 'Ethnicity in the Evolution of Asia's Armed Bureaucracies', in DeWitt C. Ellinwood and Cynthia H. Enloe (eds.), *Ethnicity and the Military in Asia* (London, 1981), p.9.

<sup>391</sup> *Straits Times*, 9 October 1948, p.5.

Royal Malayan Navy (RMN), as the MNF had become, was made up of around 80 per cent Malays, 10 per cent Chinese and 10 per cent other races, though it was hoped more Chinese would have been forthcoming<sup>392</sup>. Also symptomatic of the Emergency and uniquely to Malaya, all potential new recruits were subjected to additional security, political and criminal screening, to ensure the force was not infiltrated by communist elements<sup>393</sup>.

## Secret Societies

In addition to the Communist insurgents, there was another large, influential, and potentially-destabilising Chinese group the British had to pacify. Secret societies had existed in Singapore ever since the colony's founding in 1819. Brought across by immigrants from mainland China, they were 'branches' of the Heaven and Earth League, more commonly known as the Triad Society<sup>394</sup>. The League was known by other names, including the Hung League and the Three United League, based on the bonds that exist between Heaven, Earth and Man and where the word 'Triad' is derived from, and was originally deemed as a religious society promoting the lofty aim: 'Obey Heaven and Act Righteously'<sup>395</sup>. Similarly, the early societies in Singapore were initially less about criminality than providing the Chinese with a 'social structure,

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<sup>392</sup> *Straits Times*, 8 July 1955, p.7.

<sup>393</sup> TNA, ADM 1/21872, Item 22, 1 July 1949.

<sup>394</sup> Maurice Freedman, 'Religion and Social Realignment Among the Chinese in Singapore' in George William Skinner (ed.), *The Study of Chinese Society: Essays by Maurice Freedman* (Stanford, 1979), p.174.

<sup>395</sup> Leong Yee Fong, 'The Penang Story: Secret Societies and Politics in Colonial Malaya with Special Reference to the Ang Bin Hoey in Penang (1945-1952)', for *The Penang Project*, 28 April 2007, [www.scribd.com](http://www.scribd.com), accessed on 17 May 2010.

livelihood, protection and possibly some measure of spiritual fulfilment through its activities<sup>396</sup>. The Hung League's sole political aspirations were aimed at overthrowing the Manchu Dynasty, and there were no ambitions for political control in Singapore, instead they 'kept their ideological weapons aimed at their rulers at home'<sup>397</sup>. Once transported overseas, however, 'it lost its political significance and degenerated into an organisational machine for the oppression and extortion of the Chinese communities'<sup>398</sup>. Inevitably, clashes occurred when societies encroached upon each others territory, culminating in the Penang Riots of 1867, the 'Veranda riots' of 1872, and the Chinese Post Office riots of 1876 in Singapore<sup>399</sup>. Colonial legislation followed, leading to the registration of the societies, and successfully curbing their membership and influence by the end of the nineteenth century. Driven underground, they thus became secret.

As it did for many other marginalised groups, the political, social and economic chaos caused by the Second World War provided a fillip for the resurgence of secret societies in Singapore. Knowing that secret societies were 'centres of Chinese patriotism', the occupying Japanese attempted to check them by lopping off fingers for even the smallest thefts<sup>400</sup>. Thousands of members were executed, and those captured and tortured were only released if they betrayed their compatriots and worked for Japanese intelligence<sup>401</sup>. The extreme actions carried out against the

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<sup>396</sup> Irene Lim, *Secret Societies in Singapore: Featuring the William Stirling Collection* (Singapore, 1999), p.13.

<sup>397</sup> Freedman, 'Religion and Social Realignment Among the Chinese in Singapore', p.174.

<sup>398</sup> Leong, 'The Penang Story'.

<sup>399</sup> Carl A. Trocki, 'The Rise and Fall of the Ngee Heng Kongs in Singapore', in David Ownby and Mary Somers Heidhues (eds.), *"Secret Societies" Reconsidered: Perspectives on the Social History of Modern South China and Southeast Asia* (New York, 1993), pp.89-119, p.112.

<sup>400</sup> 'SINGAPORE: Triad in Trouble', 16 November 1959, *Time* magazine, [www.time.com](http://www.time.com), accessed on 17 May 2010.

<sup>401</sup> Irene Lim, *Secret Societies in Singapore*, p.31.

Chinese, however, served to bind the secret societies together in the form of resistance groups, where they put their subversive skills to expert use:

They were literally underground people, forces that would attack the Japanese camps, sabotage and did all kinds of things. That was when the original clan members or the so called original Chinese secret society people played a part in the country. Not so much for the country of Malaya, but more because they hated the Japanese. Many of them were involved in a group called the Sua Niau Chih (Jungle Rats or Hill Rats). They would always be in the jungle, hidden. I guess that was the reason why at the end they became communists. Later on, some of them became bandits during the British Occupation, when the British returned.<sup>402</sup>

The British return is referred to here as an 'occupation', much like the Japanese. A spark of nationalism had been flamed by the war. Whereas the rebellious actions carried out by the secret societies served to inspire the Chinese population, by contrast, the surrender of the British and their public degradation in the Prisoner of War (POW) camps at the hands of the Japanese undermined their previous imperial authority:

Those [British] that were caught on the island became very pathetic POWs, often begging around for food, shabbily dressed. It was very pathetic. They offered very little resistance, actually. It was the locals, especially the Chinese, who gave [the Japanese] a lot of resistance, especially this group

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<sup>402</sup> Interview with Rev. Neivelle Tan, conducted by Miss Chua Chee Huan, 7 February 1995 to 30 August 1995, accession number 001600/41, reel 8, transcriber Ms Chuang Lai Beng, p.97, Oral History Centre (OHC), Singapore.

of resistance fighters... they would have raiding parties, and then they would disappear in the jungles.<sup>403</sup>

Emerging from the war with newfound support and influence, the secret societies were able to take advantage of the power vacuum and the return of a humiliated and hesitant Great Britain, to reassert their control over Singapore. The colonial government, keen to encourage the formation of political parties to foster the development of an electoral system, introduced new legislation under which societies could operate without having to register<sup>404</sup>. An aborted attempt was even made to introduce a branch of the China Triad Democratic Party in 1947<sup>405</sup>. Yet there was a more daunting political affiliation competing with the British for Chinese support:

There was a little bit of confusion and all Chinese at the time, especially the Chinese-educated, were kind of taught that all Chinese must be communists. Some were quite sold on the idea. Many of the secret society members joined the Communist Party or the communist group.<sup>406</sup>

The declaration of a state of Emergency caused a fear that additional Malayan Chinese would join the insurgents, a prospect made more ominous by the societies' own wartime jungle-fighting experience. In September 1948 banishment orders for 900 secret society members suspected of being involved with the Communists were served. A police raid of a Communist hideout in December 1950 led to the arrest of a number of members of the 18 Gang, and 59 Communist demonstrators were

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<sup>403</sup> Interview with Rev. Neivelle Tan, conducted by Miss Chua Chee Huan, 7 February 1995 to 30 August 1995, accession number 001600/41, reel 8, transcriber Ms Chuang Lai Beng, p.98, OHC, Singapore.

<sup>404</sup> Irene Lim, p.31.

<sup>405</sup> Freedman, 'Religion and Social Realignment Among the Chinese in Singapore', p.174.

<sup>406</sup> Interview with Rev. Neivelle Tan, conducted by Miss Chua Chee Huan, 7 February 1995 to 30 August 1995, accession number 001600/41, reel 8, transcriber Ms Chuang Lai Beng, p.96, OHC, Singapore.

arrested six months later, also found to be members of the 18 Gang<sup>407</sup>. Despite individuals sympathising with the Communists, Communist penetration was not reflective of the secret societies as a whole, and some helped raise awareness and supplied financial support for the Kuomintang's fight against the Communists. With the British desire to acquire 'the active cooperation and goodwill' of the Chinese, these activities were encouraged through the adoption of a more lenient and collaborative attitude towards those secret society members free from Communist affiliation. In the words of one leader:

The British mentality I suppose at that time was to solve in a diplomatic way, by giving them [the secret societies] unofficial recognition and working through them so that there would be peace.<sup>408</sup>

The secret societies were thus a mechanism which helped facilitate the reassertion of British imperial control in Singapore. The British could not risk antagonising the secret societies or the Chinese population they influenced, because the legitimacy of their own returning authority was questionable. Consequently, a blind eye was turned to many of the secret societies' nefarious activities, and they in turn supported British power: 'the British were lauded when they returned, because it meant more freedom, leeway after the strict and cruel Japanese ways, we welcomed the British'<sup>409</sup>. There was thus little support for the nationalist parties among the gangs: 'We favoured the British as we were safe under them. We knew if the PAP took power we would be in

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<sup>407</sup> Irene Lim, p.32.

<sup>408</sup> Interview with Rev. Neivelle Tan, conducted by Miss Chua Chee Huan, 7 February 1995 to 30 August 1995, accession number 001600/41, reel 8, transcriber Ms Chuang Lai Beng, p.103, OHC, Singapore.

<sup>409</sup> Interview conducted by author with Rev. Neivelle Tan on 14 July 2009.

trouble'<sup>410</sup>. After they were elected to power in 1959, the People's Action Party (PAP) introduced legislation which ultimately eradicated the secret societies.

The secret societies were thus able to integrate themselves into the Singaporean local economy, becoming influential 'businessmen'. They were involved in illegal car rental businesses, prostitution, and syndicated crime<sup>411</sup>. They controlled the illegal lottery and *chap jee ki* (a Chinese card game)<sup>412</sup>. The 'general dislocation of employment, the lack of rice, and the overall shortage of supplies' created a 'climate favourable to crime'<sup>413</sup>, including smuggling and blackmarketeering. The influx of capital brought by the presence of British service personnel helped fuel the secret societies through their frequenting of gang-protected restaurants, bars, gambling dens and brothels. It was protection that still amounted to the biggest earner for the secret societies, as it had traditionally been in the nineteenth century. Leong's assertion that the societies forgot their religious and social mission and degenerated into an 'organisational machine for the oppression and extortion of the Chinese communities', is supported in this later period by Reverend Neivelle Tan, a former secret society leader:

The main source of income was protection money but protect the community against whom? There was nobody else so they ended up protecting the community against themselves.<sup>414</sup>

From the secret societies emerged gangs who had little regard for the traditional rituals and customs of the nineteenth century. The largest of these was the

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<sup>410</sup> Idem.

<sup>411</sup> Idem.

<sup>412</sup> Irene Lim, p.29.

<sup>413</sup> Wilfred Blythe, *The Impact of Chinese Secret Societies in Malaya: A Historical Study* (London, 1969), p.409-10.

<sup>414</sup> Interview conducted by author with Rev. Neivelle Tan on 14 July 2009.



Hokkien gang , which itself was comprised of several smaller gangs, each identified by a number, the major ones being '08' '18', '24', and '108'. Furthermore, each gang would be affiliated to a particular service to which the majority of its members were attached. For example, members of the Fire Brigade made up the 08 Gang. The Navy became affiliated with the 18 Gang.

A problematic consequence of imperial pressures on the British to relieve their manpower burden overseas through the recruitment of local forces, was the infiltration of such groups by secret societies. The local men employed to work in the naval base and the RMN, ended up carrying with them close links to the 18 Gang (Siao), one of the strongest gangs in Singapore, and headed by Tan. Gang members carried tattoos, symbolic of both their profession and their gang allegiance, and the Navy men in the 18 Gang were identified by a tattoo of an anchor. This common maritime symbol helped hide them from the suspicion of the British officers, but it carried an additional cultural association; the cross at the top of the tattoo was also the Chinese symbol for the number 10, whereas the anchor at the bottom was inverted so as to represent the Chinese number 8. Sometimes this would be accompanied by a rope knotted in a figure 8. The tattoo would be located on the back of hand, thus subtly revealing one's gang association to another member when shaking hands, but would be obscured when saluting a British officer<sup>415</sup>. Gang members were also identified by specific names bestowed upon them, for example,

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<sup>415</sup> Idem.

'amongst the Chinese, if his name is Ah Tee, he would be called *Hai Kuan Ah Tee*, *Navy Ah Tee*'<sup>416</sup>.

Despite their cultural origins, these gangs were not composed solely of Chinese, and most included Malay and Indian members within their ranks also. Nor was any demarcation made within the gangs. Allegiance was primarily to their gang 'brotherhood' rather than their ethnicity<sup>417</sup>. This tied in to a longer triad tradition, where 'secret society alignment and dialect "group" loyalties often cut across one another'<sup>418</sup>. One example would be the case of the Maria Hertogh riots in December 1950, which has primarily been represented as a racially-motivated protest following a court judgement that a Dutch girl raised by Muslims should be returned to her biological Catholic parents, yet:

That was when many secret society members were actually the ones that were creating the problem. It was not so much racial. However, it was put as racial. But most of the clashes, most of the riots were backed by secret society members who were actually influenced by the communists.<sup>419</sup>

It was not merely the British authorities at the top who were guilty by association of allowing the secret societies to carry out their activities without intervention. Some British naval officers were more directly implicated, with Tan knowing at least three personally, one who possessed a background in gangs in

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<sup>416</sup> Interview with Rev. Neivelle Tan, conducted by Miss Chua Chee Huan, 7 February 1995 to 30 August 1995, accession number 001600/41, reel 9, transcriber Ms Chuang Lai Beng, p.108, OHC, Singapore.

<sup>417</sup> Interview conducted by author with Rev. Neivelle Tan on 14 July 2009.

<sup>418</sup> Freedman, 'Religion and Social Realignment Among the Chinese in Singapore', p.174.

<sup>419</sup> Interview with Rev. Neivelle Tan, conducted by Miss Chua Chee Huan, 7 February 1995 to 30 August 1995, accession number 001600/41, reel 8, transcriber Ms Chuang Lai Beng, p.96, OHC, Singapore.

England<sup>420</sup>. Such men would be approached by an influential and ranking gang member within the Navy, and would be offered favours in exchange for their cooperation. These favours would normally extend to providing the British officer with women, usually prostitutes, bar-girls or waitresses under gang 'protection', places to gamble, free drinks and VIP treatment<sup>421</sup>. In exchange, the officer would become the gang's 'go-to man'. For example, if the 18 gang was involved in a clash with a rival gang - 'the hai koon (navy) and bing (army) were always the main warring parties'<sup>422</sup> - then a call would be put through to the naval base and a signal made to the aforementioned officer, at which point a naval truck filled with twenty to forty naval gang-members, still in uniform, would be dispatched to aid in the fight. On such occasions the police would not get involved as the Army and Navy carried more power and influence at the time, and it would take the military police to settle such disputes. If the regular local police force arrested an army or navy member all it would take was a call to a favoured officer and someone would be sent to release him. This privileged status was one reason why gang members chose to remain in the service. Sometimes quarrels would break out among members of the same gang, quite often over women, leading to fights at sea and even a stabbing<sup>423</sup>.

Contraband, cigarettes, beer and liquor would also be smuggled out of the naval base and sold on the blackmarket by gang-members. Illegal beer was brewed in the woods around the naval base, though this was made for local consumption mainly as it tended not to suit European tastes. One of the main roles of the local

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<sup>420</sup> Interview conducted by author with Rev. Neivelle Tan on 14 July 2009.

<sup>421</sup> Idem.

<sup>422</sup> Interview with Rev. Neivelle Tan, conducted by Miss Chua Chee Huan, 7 February 1995 to 30 August 1995, accession number 001600/41, reel 8, transcriber Ms Chuang Lai Beng, p.95, OHC, Singapore.

<sup>423</sup> Interview conducted by author with Rev. Neivelle Tan on 14 July 2009.

naval forces was anti-smuggling operations, and occasionally when a patrol vessel returned from such a mission, smaller boats manned by gang-members would go alongside to collect the contraband before the vessel entered the naval base. It would then be distributed to the syndicates.<sup>424</sup>

Although the British avoided directly challenging the secret societies, there were more subtle attempts at curbing their influence. A paternalist approach was reverted to, with the formation of navy-run boys clubs to try and attract young males off the streets and away from the gangs through the appeal of sports and games, traditional British vehicles for the development of moral 'character'. These started off well, and soccer, cricket and softball in particular were a 'big draw at first'. Eventually though, the gangs came in and took control of the clubs. They were able to do this because a local was put in charge to run them and he would have his own gang allegiances or would be susceptible to gang pressure, thus the collaborative relationship broke down. Navy chaplains were heavily used in this paternalist mission, and before he got involved in the gangs, Tan and several of his peers were recruited from school by one and taken on a tour of HMS *Terror*<sup>425</sup>, where they would be brought to the chapel, do puzzles, and listen to stories from the chaplain. A concert was even organised for them, but lots of local boys could not identify with the western conventions, instead they related more to the Chinese street concerts arranged by the gangs<sup>426</sup>. Such cultural differences and a failure to properly understand them undermined British attempts to win over the 'hearts and minds' of the Chinese youth.

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<sup>424</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>425</sup> The official name given to the naval base, after the Second World War monitor which had been stationed there.

<sup>426</sup> Interview conducted by author with Rev. Neivelle Tan on 14 July 2009.

## Reconstitution and the 'Emergency'

As well as wider social and political pressures, there were also practical imperatives which forced changes in the MNF leading to the recruitment of Chinese personnel. When the Malay Navy was reconstituted at the end of the war, despite still possessing around 350 Malay ratings, most of these were 'semi-trained men' from the seaman and communications branches and the force was restricted to operating just two vessels, a landing craft (gunnery) and a motor fishing vessel, specifically due to a lack of engine room personnel<sup>427</sup>. There was a large number of trained Chinese mechanics and engineers in Singapore, many of whom worked on the naval base, therefore when the MNF was created they were sought to plug this operational deficiency. Most of the chief engineers on the force's early MLs thus came to be Chinese. Racial stereotypes, however, also had an influence. The British believed that 'the Chinese by and large make very good engineers'<sup>428</sup>, whereas the Malays' generally lower education meant that they did not possess the same level of higher technical knowledge or standard of English that was essential for the engineering branch. Furthermore, their religion was viewed as an unreliable and undesirable element for such a position of responsibility after one Malay engineer had a habit of believing that 'Allah might provide the fuel' and causing his ML to run out before it reached port<sup>429</sup>.

Five former Harbour Defence Motor Launches, which had been used in the Arakan Campaign in Burma and were left rotting in Keppel Harbour after the war,

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<sup>427</sup> TNA, CO 537/2534, 'The Malayan Local Forces', p.3, 1946, item 96.

<sup>428</sup> Interview conducted by author with Peter Fosten on 14 August 2009.

<sup>429</sup> *Idem*.

were transferred on permanent loan to the MNF by the Royal Navy to serve as patrol vessels. They carried mixed Malay and Chinese crews, still commanded by British officers: two older reservists finishing their time after the war, and three regular Sub-Lieutenants seconded from the Royal Navy. One of these was Peter Fosten, who was serving aboard the frigate HMS *Cardigan Bay* in 1950 as part of the RN Far East fleet when a call was put out by the Singapore Government for RN volunteers to serve in the MNF. Having spent the first six years of his life on a rubber research institute station in Malaya, Fosten felt an urge to return to his roots and submitted an application, and six months later he was seconded on loan to the Singapore Government for a period of three years to serve as Commanding Officer of the ML P.3509.

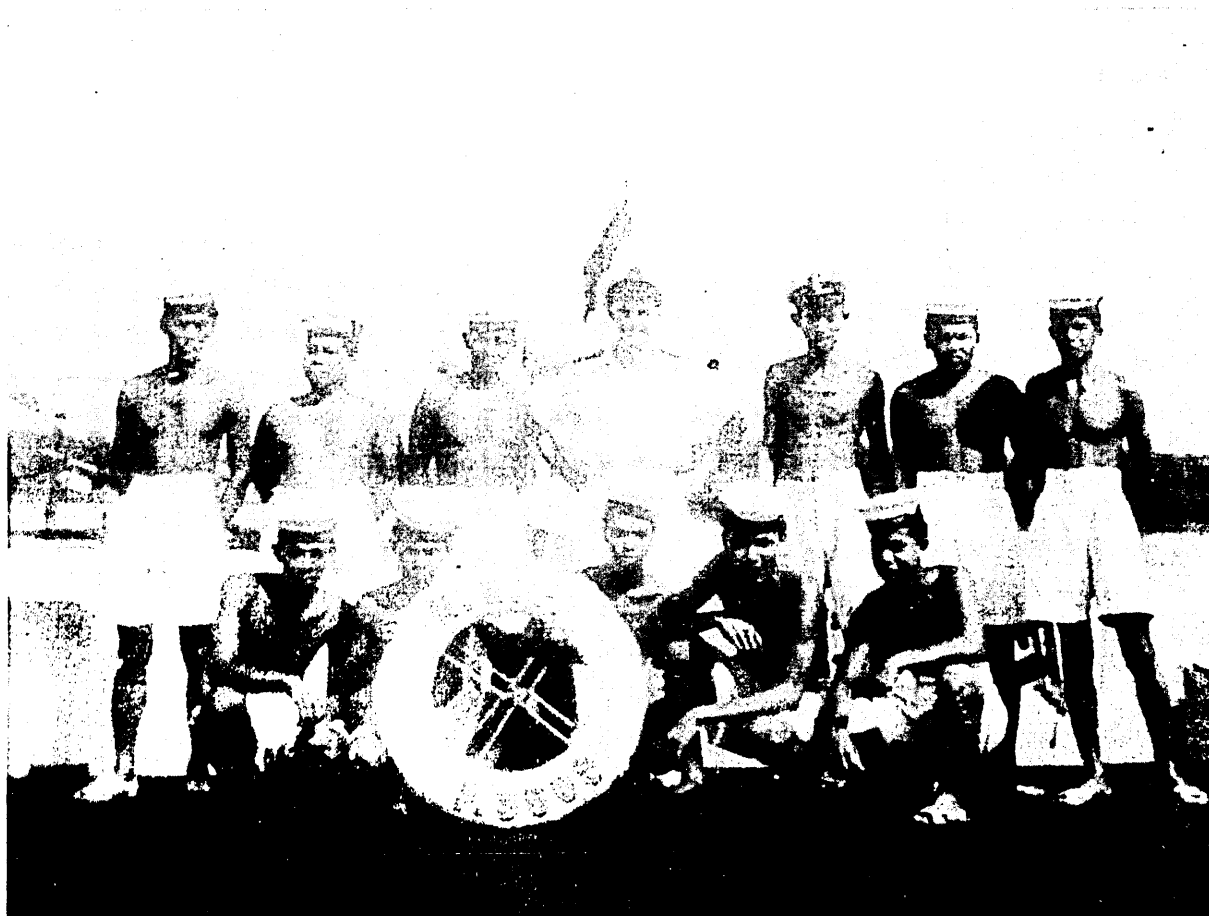


Image 6. Peter Fosten and the crew of P.3509 [Source: Peter Fosten's personal collection]

In light of their 400-mile patrol area, these patrol vessels were re-designated as 'Seaward' Defence Motor Launches, though they were not originally built for that purpose. Patrols initially lasted three months, though this was later cut down to four or five weeks, with a week in port to replenish. As well as Singapore, there were refuelling ports in Port Swettenham and Penang. The MLs had been built by a furniture company to last just a year or two and were not designed for the intensive role demanded of them by the burgeoning MNF. Only the wheelhouse and bridge were armour plated which tended to make the vessels unstable at sea. The rudders and propellers were unprotected and not designed for traversing uncharted rivers and bars, leading to the loss of many a propeller blade. The hulls would be dotted with copper patches from where holes had been punched through by the bamboo jetties. One ML would always be operational on the west coast, with one on the east, though during the North East Monsoon the MLs had to be withdrawn as sea conditions became too severe. Their primary role on the west coast was to search coastal craft for terrorists and weapons being transported to and from Indonesia. They made sure, however, that they remained within Malayan territorial waters as the MLs were only armed with ~~two 20mm Oerlikons~~ and capable of a maximum speed of 11 knots, whereas Indonesia was equipped with several ex-US Navy patrol boats capable of 40 knots and boasting twin power-operated turrets and were believed to be 'a little trigger happy'.<sup>430</sup> The MLs performed a similar role on the east coast, but would additionally check that terrorists were not resting on the fishing kalongs there. Occasionally the MLs were also called on to support army operations further inland by transporting small parties of troops, often Gurkhas, up-river behind the terrorists thus bypassing the thick jungle, and lending fire support to such operations.

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<sup>430</sup> Idem.

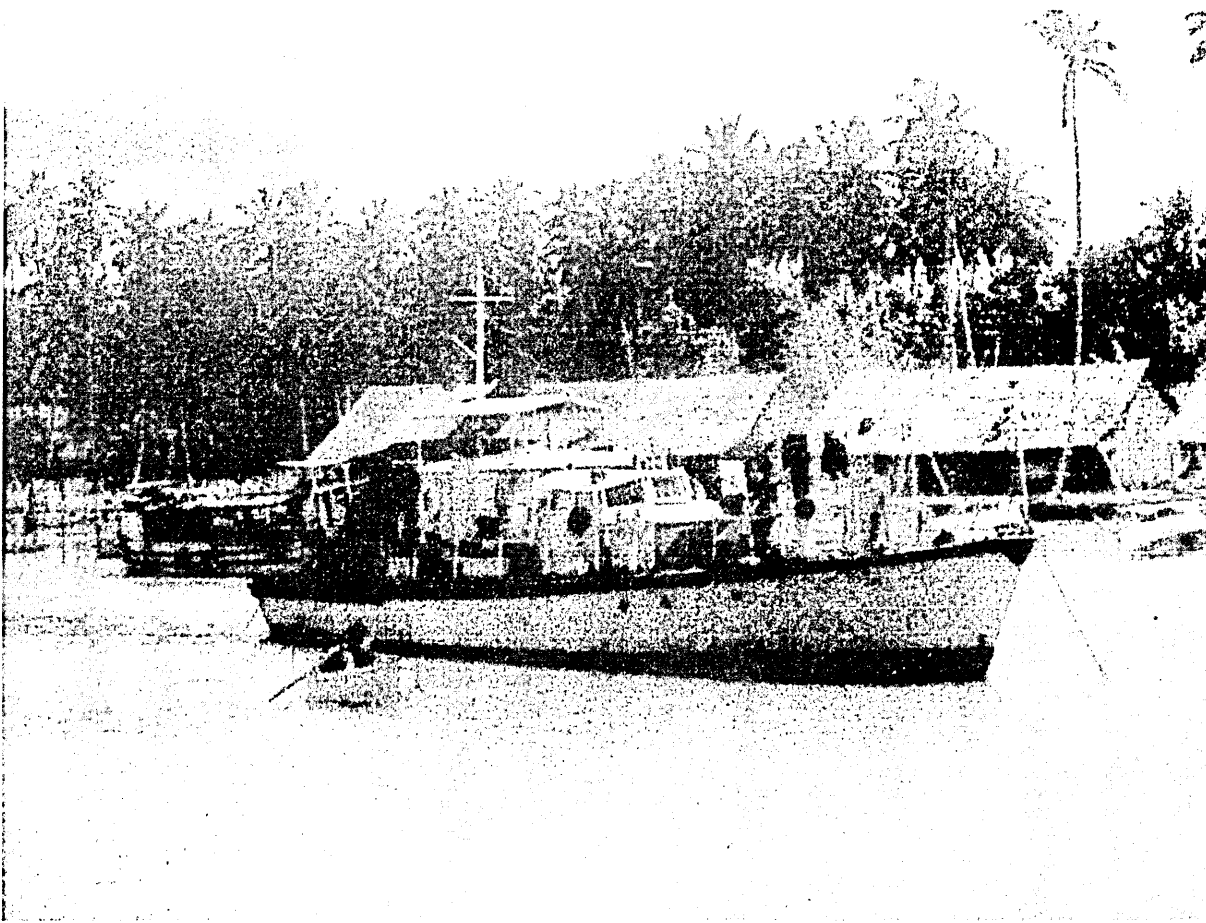


Image 7. P.3509 in Mersing, Malaya [Peter Fosten's personal collection]

Although there was also a Royal Navy frigate operating on each coast at all times, the MLs acted completely independently of them, were allowed to make their own programmes, reported directly to the Flag Officer Malaya, and were only expected to radio in once a week to report on their fuel consumption and their proposed programme for the next week. This free rein was open to abuse, however. One British skipper was a very keen rugby player, and it was noticed after several months that his ML's patrol programme would always involve visiting Port Swettenham on Saturdays. It transpired that the officer was a stalwart pillar of the local rugby club and 'it was quietly suggested to him that his promotion prospects



would be vastly improved if he if he saw fit to resign from the team at once!<sup>431</sup> On one occasion, another of the skippers, after a heavy night in the Gurkha mess, managed to put his boat aground on a chartered sandbank. In order to get her off he had to jettison the bulk of his fuel so as to lighten the vessel. His solution to avoid the authorities ever knowing of his error was to anchor in a remote bay for ten days and send entirely fictitious movement records until he had 'used up his fuel'. His crew remained loyal and officially no one ever knew at headquarters.<sup>432</sup>

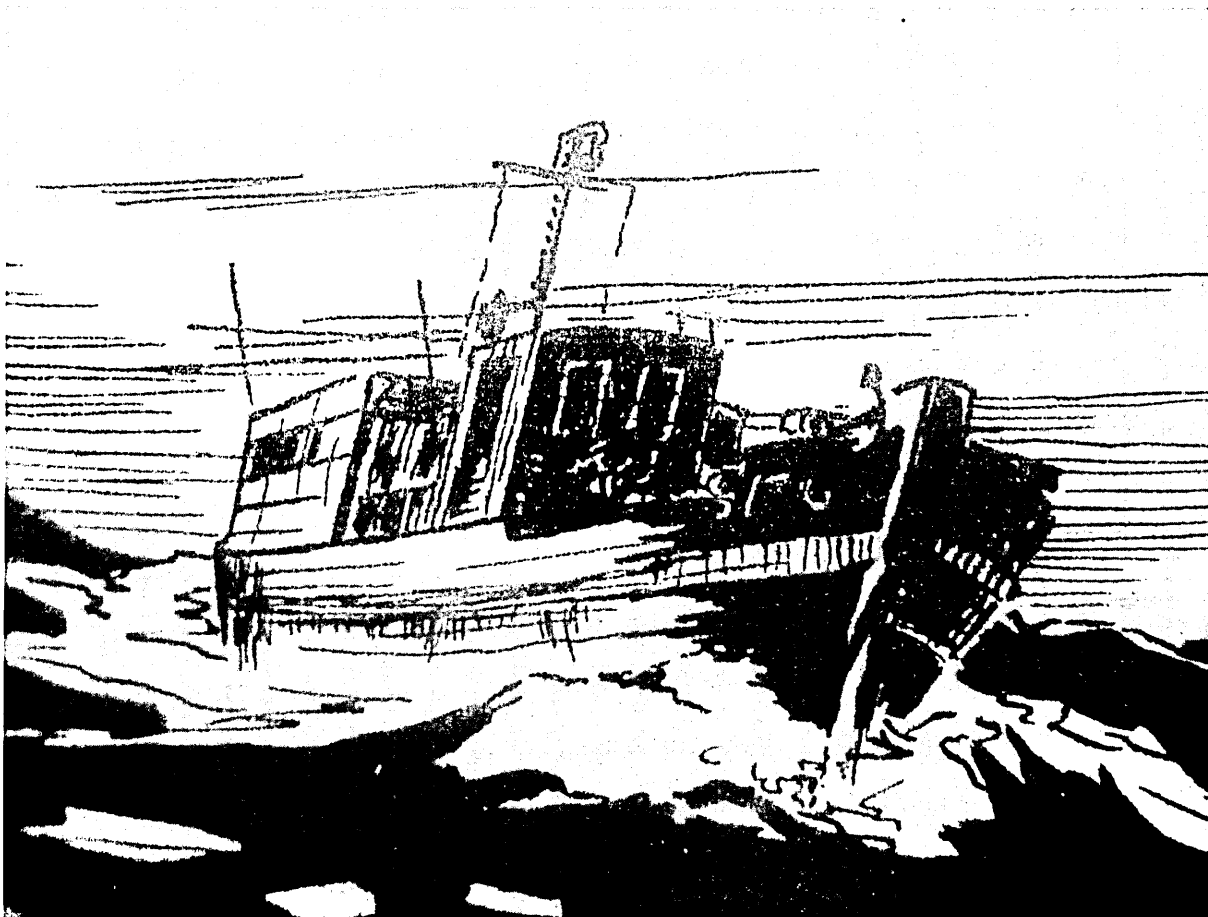


Image 8. A Malayan motor tongkang searched on patrol, depicted by Peter Fosten  
[Source: Peter Fosten's personal collection]

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<sup>431</sup> Commander Peter Fosten, RN (Retired), 'A Far East Odyssey Part Two: Aiding the Civil Power, Malaya 1950/53', personal memoir acquired from the author on 14 August 2009.

<sup>432</sup> Idem. and interview conducted by author with Peter Fosten on 14 August 2009.

One thing that was emphasised very clearly to the British officers in the MNF was that their function there first and foremost was 'to aid the civil power'.<sup>433</sup> This responsibility evinced itself most for Fosten during what began as a regular search of a motor tongkang on the east coast. The coxswain would take two men aboard the vessel to conduct the search while the CO and the rest of the crew remained on the ML covering them with the Bren Gun mounted on the bridge wing. In this particular instance the coxswain returned with a cigarette tin filled with chandu, or raw opium. The man who had been discovered with it said he had fallen out with the smugglers and offered to show them a big cache if they took him aboard, most likely hoping for a reward. They were directed to an island close to Pulau Tioman, went ashore in a dinghy and began digging above the high tide line, eventually uncovering 44 kerosine tins of chandu. Fosten, conscious of their mission 'to aid the civil power' and the need to involve the police at an early stage, left his second coxswain in hiding while they returned to Mersing, the nearest police post. There only Fosten went ashore, keeping the informant aboard to maintain secrecy, and collected the Officer Commanding the Police District and several of his men in the hope they could set an ambush. They didn't return to the island until after dark, at which point the second coxswain reported that just after sunset he had heard what sounded like a motor fishing boat close to the beach and a boat being lowered into the water. This was followed by a piercing whistle from the jungle, the sound of someone running down the beach to the boat, and a furious splashing of paddles after which the boat made a rapid departure:

It says much for the discipline and common sense of my second coxswain that he withheld fire, for if it had been innocent fisherman he could have

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<sup>433</sup> Fosten, 'A Far East Odyssey Part Two'.

ended up in court of manslaughter charges. Such are the difficulties of Aiding the Civil Power.<sup>434</sup>



Image 9. The crew of P.3509 digging for opium on Pulau Tioman [Source: Peter Fosten's personal collection]

Without radar at that time searches of the surrounding islands proved fruitless, and the following morning the forty four tins, weighing half a ton, were loaded aboard and returned to Mersing. When the *Straits Times* reported the discovery of a huge haul of opium, it was accredited to the police, something which 'galled' the crew. It was later found that this amounted to only half the shipment, as a further half ton was recovered from the sea off Singapore. It also transpired that it had originally been shipped in one of the Royal Fleet Auxiliaries bringing oil from the Persian Gulf.

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<sup>434</sup> Idem.

In addition to the five MNF-run MLs, two MLs crewed completely with Royal Navy personnel operated alongside them. Patrols would take the MLs up the Peninsula as far as the Siamese border, where there was a fear that Siam was allowing terrorists in for rest and relaxation. To discourage this and earn local favour, Fosten's ML was sent to Phuket to 'show the flag', accompanied by one of the RN-manned MLs. There they anchored in the river while opening up the ship to the general public, including a couple of Buddhist monks. The interest was 'phenomenal', as seen in the pictures below, so much so that when the boat came to take off the visitors, as they all rushed to one side of the ML it almost tipped over:



Image 10. 'Showing the flag' in Phuket, Thailand [Source: Peter Fosten's personal collection]



Image 11. 'Showing the flag' in Phuket, Thailand, with visiting Buddhist monks (left)  
[Source: Peter Fosten's personal collection]

Fosten was faced with a 'somewhat challenging cultural situation' when the local Chinese community, in order to express their thanks, decided to provide the two Commanding Officers with a meal followed by a trip to the 'best brothel in town'. This put Fosten into a rather difficult position as he was recently married (something that had not been welcomed by Nicholls) and did not feel this was part of his 'remit', though upon being taken upstairs he spotted pairs of black 'Pussers' Crabs'<sup>435</sup> outside the bedroom doors, indicating some of his crew did in fact. He took this opportunity to tell his hosts that while he was most grateful for their kindness, he would seriously lose face if he used the same establishment as his sailors, and

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<sup>435</sup> Naval issue shoes.

returned to the ship. What happened to the other RN Commanding Officer is not quite known.<sup>436</sup>

The general operational effectiveness of the two RN-crewed MLs was questioned by members of the MNF, as they carried no one aboard who could speak Malay or Chinese and interact with the local population<sup>437</sup>. All MNF officers, however, were encouraged to learn Malay, financially too as if they passed an oral exam they earned 18 pence a day extra pay. During his childhood in Malaya, Fosten used to discuss everything in Malay with his Tamil minder, and therefore upon his return he states: 'my Malay came back to me quite quickly and I was able to get totally under the ethos of another culture'<sup>438</sup>. Post-war imperial instability and uncertainty in this context helped turn British attention to an increasing need for cultural understanding in order to maintain moral authority, something further articulated by the 'hearts and minds' campaign simultaneously being waged in Malaya; for their part, the Navy would visit remote villages, drop anchor, let the kids aboard and show them films<sup>439</sup>. The primitive conditions of the MLs also meant that the men were entitled to 'hard-lying' money whilst at sea, meaning religious customs were still not always observed.

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<sup>436</sup> Interview conducted by author with Peter Fosten on 14 August 2009.

<sup>437</sup> Fosten, 'A Far East Odyssey Part Two'.

<sup>438</sup> Interview conducted by author with Peter Fosten on 14 August 2009.

<sup>439</sup> Interview with (Captain) Chitharanjan Kuttan, conducted by Jason Lim, 11 September to 24 September 2002, accession number 002697, reel 4, OHC, Singapore.

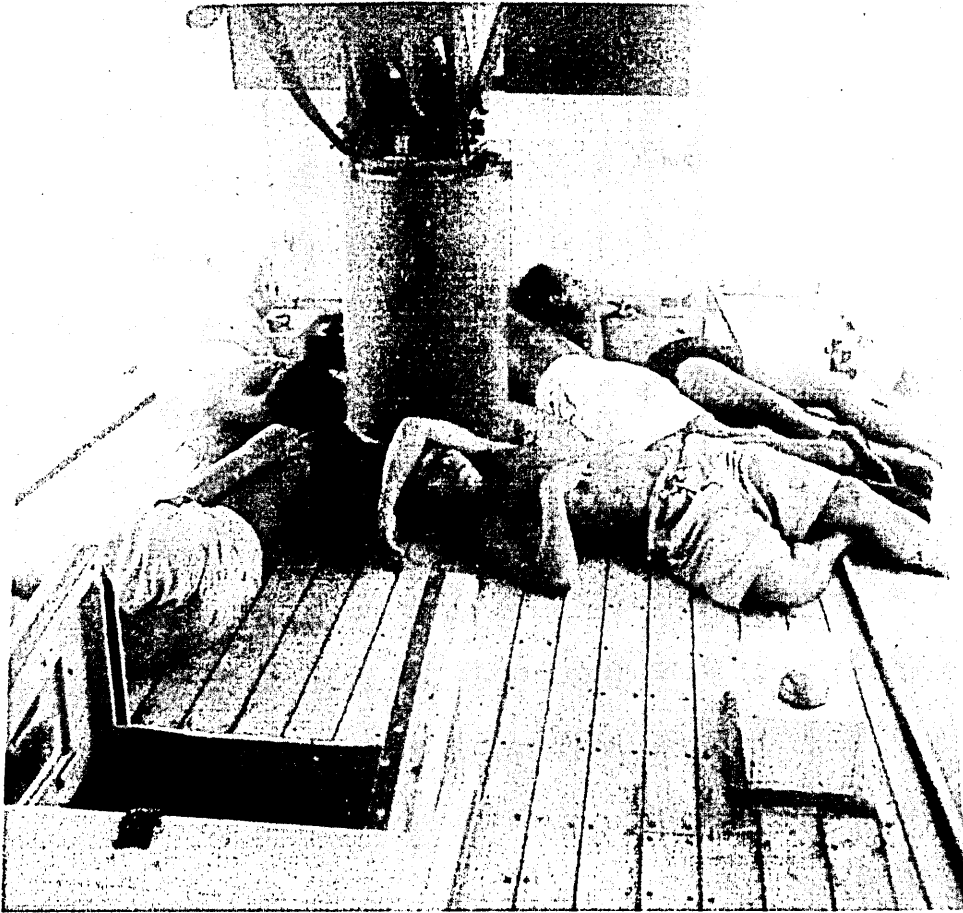


Image 12. 'Make and Mend' - The crew of P.3509 earn their hard-lying money  
[Source: Peter Fosten's personal collection]

Water was carefully rationed, and the men were only able to wash properly when in port. The MLs technically carried two separate fridges and sets of pans as the Malay Muslims were not supposed to eating from the same equipment as the rest of the crew. Within half an hour of departing on their first patrol, however, the Malay coxswain aboard Fosten's ML suggested that it would be much simpler to put away one set of pans, let one man do all the cooking, use one fridge for all the food and the other for drinks. The rest of the crew were happy with this arrangement, apart from the rating who had been appointed as the cook when he was in fact a steward, and so the coxswain had to first teach him how to cook. If they were on patrol during Ramadan the men were allowed to eat normal meals during the day because of the

strenuous duties they had to perform in the tropical heat, but if they were in the barracks they would have to observe the fast until after dusk. Therefore, whenever ML P.3509 returned to port around lunchtime, the coxswain ensured they all received a good meal first, before the men would fall in all trying to look desperately hungry as the ship went alongside. Because of the heat the ice boxes would not last long and had to be regularly replenished. Often the ice was acquired from local fishing boats, and was inevitably brown, resulting in tapeworms among the crew.<sup>440</sup>

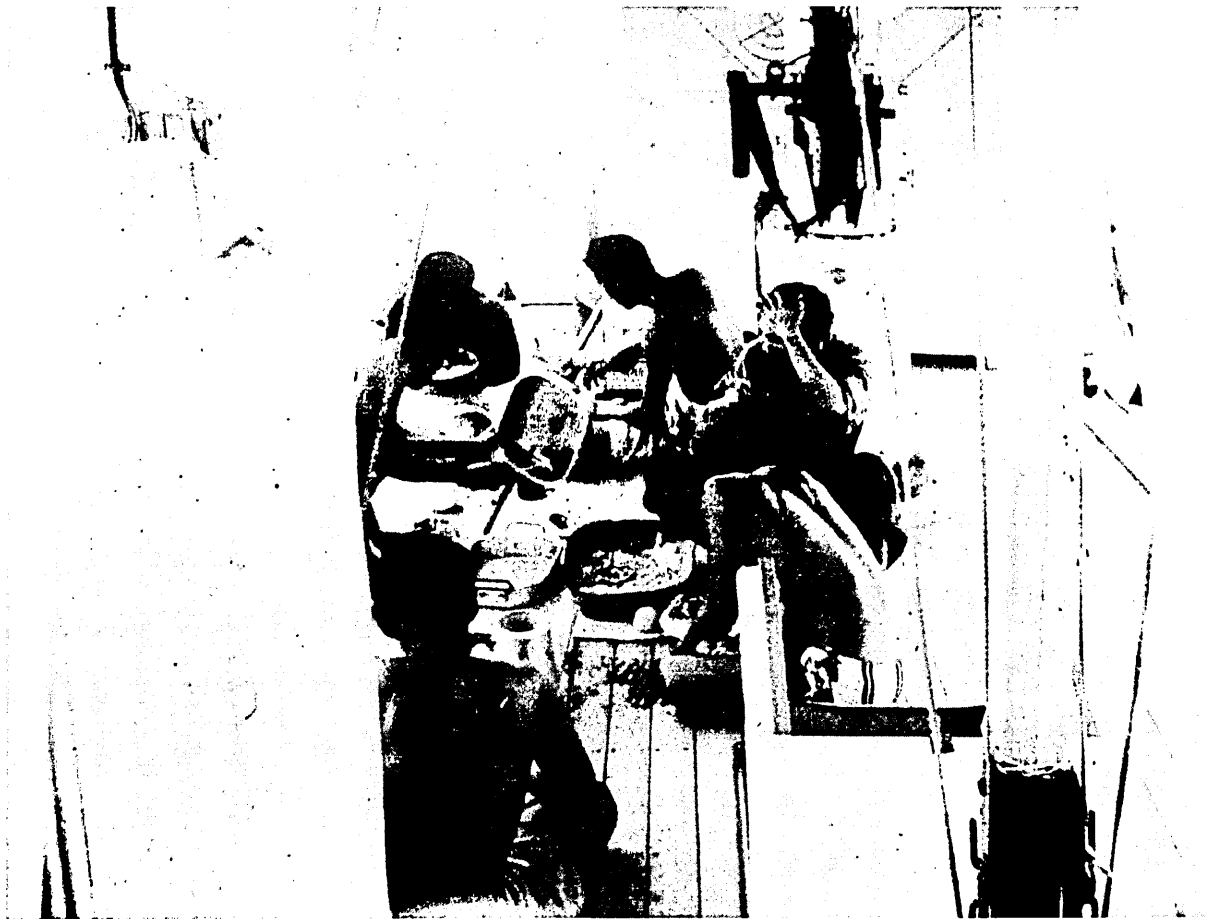


Image 13. 'Makan' (food) - P.3509's crew at mealtime [Source: Peter Fosten's personal collection]

## Expansion and Nationalisation

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<sup>440</sup> Interview conducted by author with Peter Fosten on 14 August 2009.



On 29 August 1952 the MNF was given the title of Royal Malayan Navy (RMN). Expansion grew, and the first batch of Malayan officer cadets were recruited and sent to Dartmouth for training three years later. The advertisement published in the *Straits Times* newspaper indicates a presumption that the young men of Singapore were not naturally inclined to maritime life, and depicts the Navy as a healthy occupation filled with adventure, emphasising the patriotism and traditions of the service:

Singapore depends on the sea for its livelihood. It is therefore fitting and essential that young men in Singapore should be encouraged to take an interest in the sea and ships. In peacetime, sea life is wonderful for healthy intelligent men. In war it is a most honoured service - the protection and defence of one's country. In peace or in war, there are fine traditions, good companionship, endless interests and countless voyages to places far and wide.<sup>441</sup>

Compared to the make-up of the earlier forces, those who applied were a mixed group both geographically and ethnically. Out of over 500 applicants, nine were recruited: two Malays, three Chinese, two Indians, one Sri Lankan, and one Eurasian. Seven of these were drawn from across the Peninsula, from Perlis, the northernmost state, down to Johore Bahru in the South. Perhaps reflective of the advertisement's preconception, only one officer was recruited from Singapore, with the final recruit from Pulau Bukom. The man from Singapore was Chitharanjan Kuttan, an Indian. He had seen the newspaper advertisements and specifically attributes his 'craving to be

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<sup>441</sup> *Straits Times*, 13 December 1953, p.9.

associated with the sea<sup>442</sup> as the main motivating factor for him joining the Navy, something which was fostered in Penang where he originally grew up as a boy: 'Since early days I had this sudden inclination towards the sea.'<sup>443</sup> 'When the fleet visited I made friends with the sailors, talked to them and enjoyed their company. It planted the seed'<sup>444</sup>. After moving to Singapore at the age of fourteen, Kuttan joined the Sea Cadet Corps, and though other cadets applied, Kuttan was the only one selected, largely due to the experience he had acquired after winning a month-long placement aboard a merchant vessel<sup>445</sup>. All Kuttan's batch successfully graduated from Dartmouth, though subsequent ones were not so successful. The second batch had three or four casualties, the third batch was 'a disaster... they couldn't take it... like round pegs in a square hole'<sup>446</sup>. Kuttan attributes the drop-outs to the fact that they did not possess the same 'call of the sea'; they came from inland - 'land lubbers' - and had 'never been to sea or seen a seafront'. Instead they were motivated by career opportunity and overseas education<sup>447</sup>.

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<sup>442</sup> Interview with (Captain) Chitharanjan Kuttan, conducted by Jason Lim, 11 September 2002, accession number 002697, reel 2, OHC, Singapore.

<sup>443</sup> Ibid., reel 1.

<sup>444</sup> Interview conducted by author with Chitharanjan Kuttan on 17 July 2009.

<sup>445</sup> Idem.

<sup>446</sup> Idem.

<sup>447</sup> Idem.

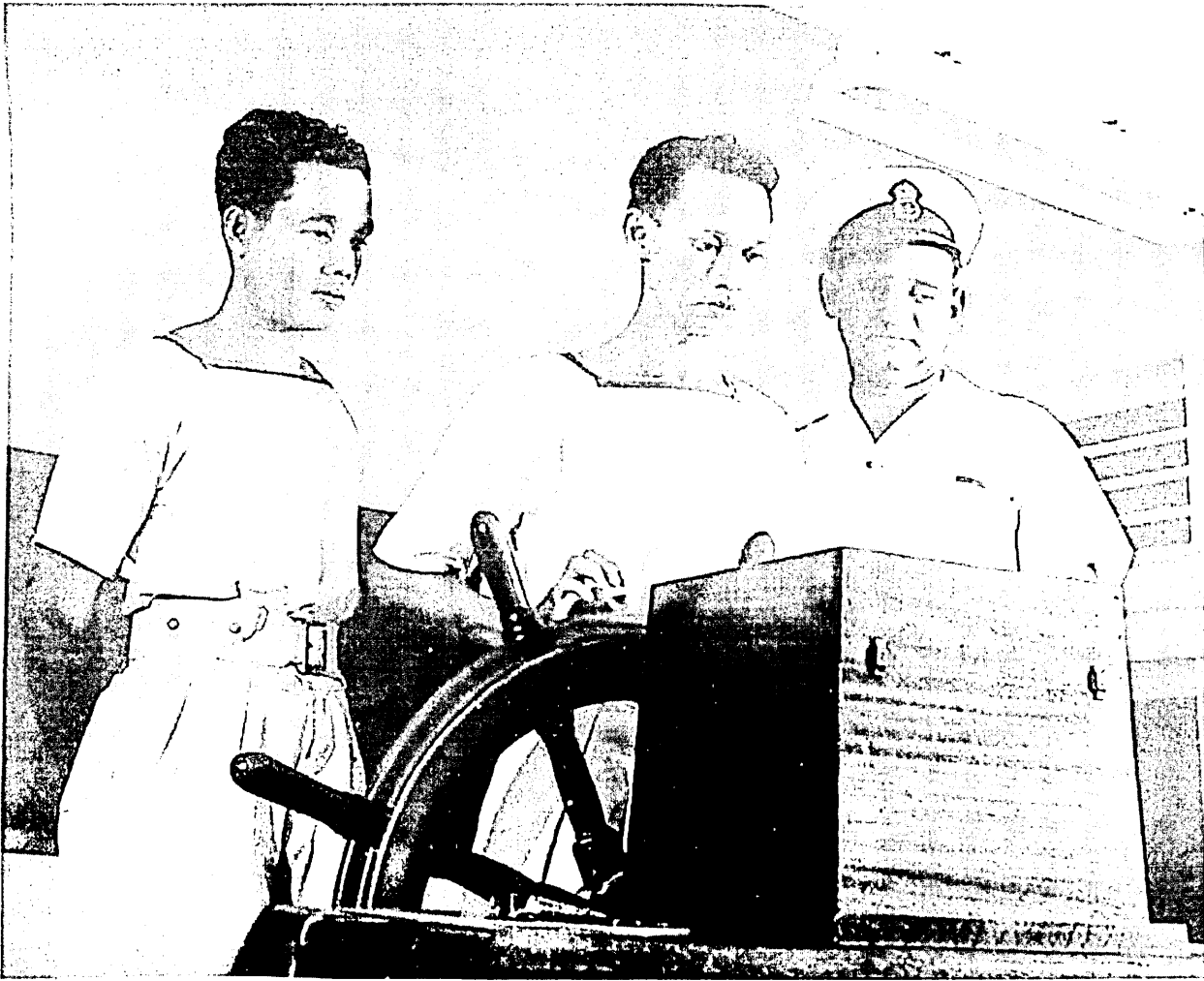


Image 14. Malayan class under steering instruction [Source: The National Archives, INF 10/199, July 1958]

While Malayan officers were being trained to take over the eventual running of the RMN, British officers remained custodians of the force in the meantime. There were issues, however, about the quality of officer being sent. Not all were Royal Navy regulars, with many being reservists. This caused a degree of hostility among some of the Malaysian officers returning from Dartmouth with a higher degree of training to that held by their RNR superiors. These feelings were exacerbated by levels of unprofessionalism encountered by some. Kuttan's first posting upon returning to Malaysia in 1961 was as Executive Officer of an inshore minesweeper. His Commanding Officer was a Lieutenant Commander, RNR, and a veteran of the RMN

for many years, but a man seen as 'useless at navigation', and a 'disgrace to the British navy, a total pisshead'<sup>448</sup>.

[He was] a very poor professional and also a very poor quality man, he was on his whiskey from sunrise to sundown... unhappiness began to grow in me right from the start after my return.<sup>449</sup>

The officer was caught when he was unable to bring the ship alongside the dock in harbour after a fleet exercise, after which the Chief of the RMN, Admiral W. J. Dovers, came aboard to inspect the vessel and caught the CO asleep in his cabin. The man was relieved from his command on the spot.<sup>450</sup> He was not the exception, however:

There were quite a number of seconded British officers like him. All terrible, had quarrels with them, their professional knowledge was almost zero. The Royal Navy made a big mistake sending rubbish; it set a very bad example. Late on the Malaysian Armed Forces became wise to it and started requesting Royal Australian Navy officers, they sent the best.<sup>451</sup>

Ultimately, three Australian officers, Dovers, Commodore A. M. Synnot, and Commodore A. N. Dollard, headed the RMN before 'Bob' Thanabalasingam Karalasingam was appointed as the first Malaysian to acquire the top position on 1 December 1967.

Karu Selvaratnam joined the RMN in 1960. Born in Perak, but from a Sri Lankan background, he signed up as an artificer apprentice. The course lasted 5

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<sup>448</sup> Idem.

<sup>449</sup> Interview with (Captain) Chitharanjan Kuttan, conducted by Jason Lim, 11 September 2002, accession number 002697, reel 2, OHC, Singapore.

<sup>450</sup> Confirmed in separate interview conducted by author with Tan Sri Thanabalasingam on 25 June 2009.

<sup>451</sup> Interview conducted by author with Chitharanjan Kuttan on 17 July 2009.

years, though a lot of that time Karu spent playing sport, at which he represented Malaysia internationally at cricket, hockey, badminton, and track and field, leading the naval chief to comment that he would never make a good engineer as he was hardly around, and it was 'highly possible you could sink a ship!'<sup>452</sup> This sporting pedigree, however, helped Karu when he left to do a one-year short-service commission course at Dartmouth in 1966, a culture attuned to both the physical and moral benefits of sport for its officer class. This high threshold led to one of Karu's fellow Malaysian cadets dropping out because he 'didn't have the mental strength [and was] physically weak too'. Soon after Karu returned, Thanabalasingam was appointed as head of the RMN. The Malayan Navy had traditionally possessed a good reputation in track and field, boxing and football, and the new Malaysian chief wanted to bring back those 'old glory' days, and so appointed Karu to oversee this development<sup>453</sup>. In 1970 a 'sports carnival TLDM'<sup>454</sup> was launched in KD *Malaya*, the RMN's HQ at Woodlands, Singapore, drawing together all its units to compete in a variety of sporting events. By 1975 this had expanded to encompass 1,000 participants in 18 events<sup>455</sup>. Sport thus played an important role in the 'nationalisation' of the force as a tool to help forge service identity, pride, and unity; an important task for any young navy, but even more so for one drawn from a multiethnic state.

## Graft, Corruption and Patronage

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<sup>452</sup> Interview with Karu Selvaratnam conducted by author on 30 June 2009.

<sup>453</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>454</sup> TLDM = Tentera Laut Diraja Malaysia (Royal Malaysian Navy)

<sup>455</sup> Royal Malaysian Navy (ed.), *Serving the Nation* (Kuala Lumpur, 2004), p.40.

Even though from 1960 onwards British officers no longer held the most senior position in the RMN, British influence was still exerted through other means. As well as recruitment, another major issue of naval expansion and imperial transition to nationalisation was that of procurement. One of Thanabalsingam's early priorities was to acquire a surface-to-surface missile system for the RMN, but he was unable to find a suitable product in the UK, Australia or India, and so he turned to the US. The Americans, however, mistook Thana's meaning of 'missile deterrence' and showed him an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), prompting Thana to explain that 'if I put one of those missiles aboard one of my ships it would sink!' Thana puts their poor state of intelligence on the RMN down to an assumption that the US saw them as under the British umbrella. Ultimately he decided to acquire Exocet missiles from France, the first time that any naval equipment had been sourced from outside the UK, prompting several informal attempts by the British at dissuading Thana, including a private dinner invitation from the British High Commissioner<sup>456</sup>.

Prior to that, in the mid-1960s, four *Perkasa*-class motor torpedo boats (MTBs) were ordered for the RMN from the Vosper Thorneycroft with each boat costing \$4.2 million<sup>457</sup>. As Kuttan put it, 'the British navy was running the show, so naturally they got the contract'<sup>458</sup>. Between 1966 and 1967, the then Lieutenant Commander Kuttan was serving as Staff Officer (Personnel and Training) at the Ministry of Defence in Kuala Lumpur. During that time, Kuttan attended a meeting where the then Chief of the Navy, Admiral Dollard, briefed the senior staff that following a visit

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<sup>456</sup> Interview conducted by author with Tan Sri Thanabalsingam on 25 June 2009.

<sup>457</sup> *Straits Times*, 27 September 1967, p.7.

<sup>458</sup> Interview with (Captain) Chitharanjan Kuttan, conducted by Jason Lim, 11 September 2002, accession number 002697, reel 3, OHC, Singapore.

to the shipyard, delivery of the MTBs was going to be delayed because of engineering problems. This led Kuttan to ask whether a penalty clause was going to be imposed, at which Dollard got agitated and ordered the Technical and Finance officers to brief him. After Dollard had left, Kuttan was told by the Commanders: 'You guys are not in a fit enough state to drive those ships yet'. This prompted the reply, 'Sir, I am paying for my boat, whether I am fit enough to drive her is my business'<sup>459</sup>. There was still a belief amongst the British that the Malaysians were not yet ready to run their own navy and a prolonged British presence was still required. This cultural hegemony was reinforced by the technical dependency the Malaysians still had on the Royal Navy and British shipbuilding, and the relative influence the latter had to affect RMN operations, and by extension, Malaysian foreign policy in a region which was still, albeit only just, part of Britain's sphere of influence. The MTBs were needed operationally, but were delayed by months and did not enter service until 1967. The incident led Kuttan to question his future career in the Navy:

At that point I realised I cannot go on like this. I had taken on the Chief of the Navy and two major heads of department, I knew my promotion prospects were all gone. So I started thinking about leaving at that stage.<sup>460</sup>

Around thirty years later, one of the British officers came to stay with Kuttan in Singapore, during which time he confirmed to Kuttan the real reason for the delays and why no penalty clause was exacted<sup>461</sup>:

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<sup>459</sup> Interview conducted by author with Chitharanjan Kuttan on 17 July 2009.

<sup>460</sup> Interview with (Captain) Chitharanjan Kuttan, conducted by Jason Lim, 11 September to 24 September 2002, accession number 002697, reel 4, OHC, Singapore.

<sup>461</sup> Interview conducted by author with Chitharanjan Kuttan on 17 July 2009.

A lot of people were on the take, a lot of kickback... that's why they didn't want to impose it see...not just at that level, but it was all the way up. You're talking about millions and millions and millions, one percent, two percent, a hell of a lot of money. Under those circumstances my sentiments towards the navy started waning.<sup>462</sup>

The kickbacks were said to have gone up as far as civil service level, but this culture of corruption was much more deeply engrained in the RMN, even at its lower levels. As the Commanding Officer of a motor launch, Kuttan had once broken a scam involving the supply of fresh victuals. These were very difficult to account for, as items such as fish and vegetables could not be counted in terms of numbers. As he was signing away the bills one day Kuttan noticed that certain figures were familiar, yet they could not be exactly the same, so he checked it out and discovered there had been double billing:

The smallest ones get caught first, I reported him, he was sent to detention.

The kickback went all the way up to the Chief Supply Officer, a British Commander. He was sent back quietly.<sup>463</sup>

On another occasion, Kuttan was the CO of a minesweeper during the Indonesian confrontation when they had to dock for repairs. He knew there was a scam going on at the shipyard, so he ordered the engineer to stay in a hotel in the vicinity of the shipyard, and each day check every part of the ship on which work was meant to have been done. During the month-long refit, the shipyard kept sending supplemental lists of supplies for work which was not needed. At the end the

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<sup>462</sup> Interview with (Captain) Chitharanjan Kuttan, conducted by Jason Lim, 11 September to 24 September 2002, accession number 002697, reel 4, OHC, Singapore.

<sup>463</sup> Interview conducted by author with Chitharanjan Kuttan on 17 July 2009.



engineer made a list of all the jobs the shipyard had said they had done but had not, and Kuttan sent it directly to the Chief of the Navy. Kuttan was hauled up in front of the Chief Technical Officer, a British officer, and castigated for not having followed the proper chain of command, but no action was taken against the shipyard<sup>464</sup>. In 1972, RMN finance officer Augustus De Cruz was charged on three cases of corruption, involving more than \$187,000. He was claimed to have used three invoices from Guan Bee Slipway Company of Singapore to mislead the Navy in 1969, falsely certifying on the invoices that emergency works had been done satisfactorily on the three ships while knowing that there were no such works<sup>465</sup>. Kuttan claims that De Cruz was just 'a small boy in the thing, a victim of circumstances, the big bosses got away with it... it's still going on'<sup>466</sup>. The work of R.S. Milne supports Kuttan's assertion:

In practice the government's anti-corruption measures have been directed almost exclusively to combating petty corruption. An Anti-Corruption Agency was founded in 1967... [but] it was generally believed that its operations did not touch the "big fish"... It is significant that, by and large, the only "big fish" who came under serious pressure were those who had clashed with powerful political enemies who were still bigger fish.<sup>467</sup>

This assessment is further reinforced by Y. Mansoor Marican:

A criticism frequently made about the NBI (and also the ACA) is that it arrested mostly the "small fish" (lower level officials who received small

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<sup>464</sup> Idem.

<sup>465</sup> *Straits Times*, 3 August 1972, p.9.

<sup>466</sup> Interview conducted by author with Chitharanjan Kuttan on 17 July 2009.

<sup>467</sup> R.S. Milne, 'Levels of Corruption in Malaysia: A Comment on the Case of Bumiputra Malaysia Finance', *Asian Journal of Public Administration*, June 1987, Vol.9, No.1, pp.56-73, p.57.

bribes), and left the “big fish” (syndicates, big businessmen, and influential politicians involved in large-scale corruption) relatively free to continue their illegal operations.<sup>468</sup>

Furthermore, the Malaysian Government and Royal Malaysian Navy continue to be plagued by corruption scandals, and it is acknowledged that despite the modernisation of maritime agencies and establishment of new naval bases, 'it remains difficult to secure Malaysian waters and corruption is a problem among some Malaysian officers'<sup>469</sup>. The police have even stated that 'a number of pirate victims do not report attacks, as they are “afraid of acts of revenge as they believe, or know, that law enforcement agencies are themselves involved in illegal activities.”<sup>470</sup> In another ship procurement scandal, in July 2005, the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) revealed serious corruption in the management of the PSC-Naval Dockyard Sdn Bhd (PSC-NDSB) and their 5.4 billion ringgit contract to supply six offshore patrol vessels (OPVs)<sup>471</sup>, a figure which became inflated to 6.75 billion ringgits. In relation to the case, the Auditor General's Report, tabled in the Malaysian Parliament on 7 September 2006, revealed details of 'dubious award of contract to an obviously unqualified contractor; failure of technical and financial management; hefty illegitimate contract price increases, and overpayment, unjustifiable waiver of penalties, huge undocumented payments, and complete failure of ministry oversight'. This lack of transparency has been seen as symptomatic of the Malaysian trend to award contracts to a few favoured individuals and companies, and not through a

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<sup>468</sup> Y. Mansoor Marican, 'Combating Corruption: The Malaysian Experience', *Asian Survey*, Vol.19, No.6 (June 1979), pp.597-610, p.606.

<sup>469</sup> Carolin Liss, 'The Privatisation of Maritime Security – Maritime Security in Southeast Asia: Between a rock and a hard place?', Working Paper No. 141, February 2007, Asia Research Centre, Murdoch University, p.6.

<sup>470</sup> Liss interview (confidential), Malaysia, in idem.

<sup>471</sup> Kuldeep S. Jessy, 'Greed and graft in dockyard scandal', *The Star*, 16 July 2005.

competitive bidding process. When the OPV deal was initially awarded in September 1998, PSC-NDSB, a company which had no experience of building anything more technically sophisticated than trawlers and police boats, was owned by United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) member Amin Shah Omar Shah<sup>472</sup>.

It could be argued that this lack of industrial competitiveness and inadequate technical skill-base is a legacy of colonialism, its deliberate underdevelopment of the country's indigenous industrial base, particularly amongst the Malay population, and its preferential treatment of British firms. Post-independence, not only did local infrastructure have to be developed to cope with the demands of the new nation, but also there was a perpetuation of the culture of 'patronage'. There is a sizeable literature devoted to the academic study of corruption within post-colonial societies, particularly Africa and Asia countries. A pioneer in this field has been the Islamic Malaysian academic Syed Hussein Alatas. Though he recognises that corruption existed during colonialism and before, he argues that the period of decolonisation combined a unique set of conditions which provided the opportunity for corruption to flourish:

- (a) widespread corruption during the war period preceding the achievement of independence;
- (b) a sudden increase in bureaucracy;
- (c) a sudden increase in opportunities for corruption on a bigger and higher scale;

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<sup>472</sup> Kim Quek, 'Malaysia's M\$6.75b naval scandal', *Malaysia Today*, 13 September 2007, <http://malaysia-today.net/blog2006/corridors.php?itemid=8117>.

(d) the invasion of the different levels of leadership by people of low moral integrity;

(e) inexperience of leaders fighting for independence in building an incorrupt and efficient government – some were indifferent and lacking in moral integrity; and

(f) manipulation and intrigues of foreign financial and business powers through means of corruption.<sup>473</sup>

The Second World War, and the Japanese occupation of Southeast Asia produced a situation where a 'scarcity of goods and foodstuffs, together with rampant inflation, within the context of little governmental control, made corruption the most efficient means of supplementing income'. Post-war, the rise of nationalist party-politics in the years surrounding independence, matched with an increased emphasis towards economic developments and modernisation, led to a 'marriage of business and politics', and fostered an atmosphere where 'in Malaysia it is widely believed that firms and industries contribute millions to party funds'. Within such a system, the culture of patronage engrained in Malay society helped legitimise the corrupt dealings of those businesses who sought the 'patronage' of the ruling politic:

The corruptive influence of the war period, the rapid increase in the number of government offices, the rapid extension of the power and opportunities of the bureaucracy, coupled with the weakness of supervision from the top, and the influence of political parties, provided a fertile soil for corruption. It was in this highly vulnerable context that

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<sup>473</sup> Syed Hussein Alatas, *Corruption: Its Nature, Causes and Functions* (Aldershot, 1990), p.69.

business and industry began to 'grease the palm' of an already susceptible bureaucracy.<sup>474</sup>

Alatas also links the social migration which accompanies the move towards capitalist modernity as another factor in facilitating:

Rapid urbanization brought about the weakening of rural values. Social controls which maintained frugality and simplicity of life were replaced by those encouraging materialism, impersonalism, status-seeking, greed for money and power, and an unwillingness to adhere to moral values. In this climate the business and commercial classes, whose ranks were swelled by speculators and adventurers of the war period, extend their corruptive influence.<sup>475</sup>

It was this very transformation which preoccupied the minds of the UMNO political leadership, particularly following the race riots of 13 May 1969. They believed that communal antagonism was symptomatic of structural economic inequalities within Malaysian society, focused around the commercially-dominant Chinese classes and the largely rural Malay population. This division of labour had grown out of the colonial economy during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, where 'coolie' labour was sought from India and China for the tin and rubber industries because of racial stereotypes of the 'lazy Malay'.

Although Alatas argues that the move away from rural structures to urban ones broke down the old value systems which acted as a moral compass, he also suggests that those same traditional allegiances which accompanied Malay

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<sup>474</sup> Ibid., p.91.

<sup>475</sup> Ibid., p.71.

feudalism remained and adapted to the new structures. The notion of patronage, for example, meant Malays still believed that their loyalty granted them a degree of protection from their rulers, however morally dubious their actions may be. This concept Alatas calls 'psychological feudalism':

The important conditions to obtain protection from feudal rulers and chiefs were unflinching loyalty and subservice towards the master. In return for these, protection was granted irrespective of the nature and degree of the crime. The modern version of this relationship is found in the political party.<sup>476</sup>

Such inherent attitudes and relationships helped foster post-colonial corruption, by allowing its exploiters to act safe under the 'patronage' of the UMNO.

Alatas argues that 'the scope and incentive for corruption were greatest at points where important decisions were taken which would substantially affect the fortunes of interested groups or individuals, such as in assessment and collection of taxes, obtaining licences, contracts or orders for supplies'<sup>477</sup>. This clearly encompasses areas of naval ship procurement and victuals, and Alatas cites further examples of corruption within Malaysia's armed forces which substantiate Kuttan's earlier claims to this effect. In 1977, the Auditor General noted irregularities in the records of the navy stores depot, 'to the extent that it was impossible to ascertain whether items from the stores were properly issued'. He concluded that:

Although I have for several years been reporting to the Ministries and Departments and to the Treasury about the extent of irregularities and the

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<sup>476</sup> Syed Hussein Alatas, 'Feudalism in Malaysian society: a study in historical continuity', in Syed Hussein Alatas, *Modernization and Social Change* (Sydney, 1972), pp.108-9.

<sup>477</sup> Alatas, *Corruption*, p.71.

supply of fresh rations, no action has to my knowledge been taken to stop the abuse as described in the preceding paragraphs, and this practice has cost and is continuing to cost the Government several million dollars a year.<sup>478</sup>

Alatas goes on to say that 'I have heard similar laments from auditor-generals in Malaysia for at least two decades... From the Malaysian audit reports alone there are sufficient grounds to suspect that corruption is firmly entrenched within the usual channels of the decision-making chain in the high budget administration'<sup>479</sup>:

The fear is that since 1957, the year of independence, corruption has definitely been growing. We see numerous political figures and others amassing wealth through being in office. It is public knowledge that there is a great deal of corruption in the customs, among the highway police, immigration control, the land office, the supply acquisition units of various ministries, the religious departments in the states of the Federation, and the road transport offices.<sup>480</sup>

Official statistics list that in the period 1968-72, of 14,825 corruption cases investigated, 303 resulted in convictions and disciplinary actions<sup>481</sup>. This is in contrast to the end-colonial period of 1950-57, where 1,813 cases resulted in 1,411 convictions<sup>482</sup>. These included bribes offered by the public and requested by the Civil Service, making false declarations in documents with the intention to defraud the Government, extortion by members of the public and the civil service, smuggling,

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<sup>478</sup> Ibid., p.76.

<sup>479</sup> Ibid., p.77.

<sup>480</sup> Ibid., p.86.

<sup>481</sup> Marican, 'Combating Corruption', p.602.

<sup>482</sup> Ibid., p.603.

and possession of illegal drugs and stolen goods<sup>483</sup>. Such activities mirror the allegations levelled at the RMN, particularly when considered in relation to the 1950s when RMN members were involved in smuggling, the blackmarket, and the patronage of secret societies. Clearly there were colonial roots to such behaviour, and attitudes regarding its acceptability which were fostered through official channels such as the Navy, thus providing a degree of moral absolution in the process which transcended independence. The more accommodating attitude adopted by the British following their return to Malaya, so as to solidify their hegemonic position undermined by the Japanese, and responding to increased opportunities for exploitation which had grown out of wartime conditions, can be viewed in such statistics. The comparatively low number of investigations conducted during the last decade of colonial rule, but the high proportion of convictions indicates that there was a problem with corruption, but an unwillingness to air it except in the most serious cases because of the destabilising effect it could have on British power. This is reflected in Alatas' assertion that 'not only was there corruption in the colonial administration but it was further increased by the indirect effect of nationalist agitation against the government'<sup>484</sup>. Political challenges to colonial rule led the British to seek out new collaborative allies, such as secret societies, a relationship facilitated through corruption. By contrast, in the post-independence period, the prevalence of corruption has been much more widely acknowledged, 'there is no dearth of allegations about corrupt practices, with opposition party politicians vocal in

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<sup>483</sup> David J. Gould and Jose A. Amaro-Reyes, 'The Effects of Corruption on Administrative Performance: Illustrations from Developing Countries', *World Bank Staff Working Papers*, no.580, *Management and Development Series*, no.7, pp.5-6.

<sup>484</sup> Alatas, *Corruption*, p.90.



this regard'<sup>485</sup>, and there has been increased public debate regarding the seeming 'increase in the incidence of bribery, kickbacks, payoffs, and other corrupt practices in the country'<sup>486</sup>. Corruption's systemic nature in Malaysia, however, has produced a proportionally low number of convictions, which in turn has fed the problem by decreasing disincentive yet providing increased opportunity for exploitation.

Corruption has also been seen as symptomatic of the UMNO's legislative attempts to elevate the economic status of the Malays, primarily through the country's New Economic Policy (NEP). Formulated in 1971, in the aftermath of the 1969 communal riots, it aimed to forge national unity by reducing the socio-economic disparity between the largely urban and business-dominant Chinese minority, and the predominantly rural Malay majority. This was to be achieved through affirmative action afforded to the *bumiputra*, translated as the 'sons of the soil', and comprising specifically the Islamic portion of the Malay population. Such policies encompassed 'state-held trusts, government contracts, business credit, scholarships, business licences, university admission, and employment in the public or corporate sector'<sup>487</sup>. It has been argued by Sri Tharan, however, that 'a potential or capacity for systems corruption has emerged alongside the provisions of the NEP for creating a class of Malay entrepreneurs'<sup>488</sup>. Increased Governmental intervention in the fields of commerce and industry thus created not only for the "potential winners"... an opportunity for self-gain and benefit', but also:

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<sup>485</sup> Hans H. Indorf, 'Party System Adaptation to Political Development in Malaysia during the First Decade of Independence, 1957-1967', Ph.D. thesis (New York University, 1969), pp.469-70.

<sup>486</sup> Marican, 'Combating Corruption', p.609.

<sup>487</sup> Aihwa Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty* (Duke University Press, 2006), p.80.

<sup>488</sup> 'Systems Corruption' denotes 'a mode of holistic corruption that is capable of affecting the whole political-administrative system, as distinct from other modes of corruption that affect only parts of the system' - Sri Tharan, 'Systems Corruption and the New Economic Policy', *Philippine Journal of Public Administration*, Vol.XXIII, No.1 (January 1979), pp.39-60, p.40.

To the “potential losers,” the threat of relative deprivation in the domain of their vested and established interests leads to an “extended search” for political protection in an unstable policy environment. They are impelled to seek “connections” and to offer a sharing of their wealth and interests in exchange for continued access to the arena and participation in new opportunities in this field.<sup>489</sup>

The concept of patronage evinces itself again here in a relationship where 'political elites assume the role of patrons to business elites (clients)'<sup>490</sup>, and where 'diversion-flows'<sup>491</sup> are among the mechanisms whereby patronage is reinforced. These can manifest themselves in the form of 'illegal surcharges, unrepresented checks, spending not governed by rules and regulations, illegal collection of fees, unauthorized and unvouched payments, irregular purchases, abuse of powers, and improper contract awarding'<sup>492</sup>. The RMN would have potentially been a prime outlet for most of these diversion-flows, as attested by Kuttan. In an incident reminiscent of Fosten's drug seizure and prescient considering the wider corruption highlighted by Kuttan, in 1971 Lieutenant Commander Karu stopped a coastal merchant ship while in command of the patrol craft *KD Sri Kelantan*. Upon inspection it was discovered that the vessel was carrying contraband, at which point the smuggler captain came aboard with a briefcase and tried to make a deal. Karu refused and the Marine police

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<sup>489</sup> Ibid., p.41.

<sup>490</sup> Ibid., p.43.

<sup>491</sup> 'Diversion-flows are flows of resources, funds, etc. away from the intended and officially stated purposes, and from target groups to groups who are not intended as recipients. Such flows are usually tapped by middle-level and higher-level bureaucrats either on their own or in collaboration with individuals and small groups outside the bureaucracy', in *ibid.*, p.43.

<sup>492</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.43-6.

were called in and the case handed to them, which led Karu to be admonished by headquarters as the police would have taken the money for themselves<sup>493</sup>.

## 'Islamisation' and the Quota System

The RMN's growing post-war plurality led to the increased interference of cultural factors in the running of the force, with conflicting outcomes. Whereas during both Rahman Abdul and Peter Fosten's time it was commonly accepted that one ate whatever food was given, regardless of religious custom, by the mid-1950s as the country approached independence this casual acceptance was beginning to change. In March 1955, the *Utusan Melayu* published the complaints of six Muslim Malay cooks after they were made to handle pork in the mess. Captain Nicholls responded by saying all cook recruits were warned beforehand that they would be required to handle items of European diet<sup>494</sup>. This vocal discontent, however, indicated an emerging concept of 'Malayness' within the Navy, conjoined to that which was being constructed by nationalists and would be more forcibly imposed on the service after it was transferred to the newly-independent Government of Malaya on 1 July 1958.

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<sup>493</sup> Interview with Karu Selvaratnam conducted by author on 30 June 2009.

<sup>494</sup> *Straits Times*, 5 March 1955, p.7.

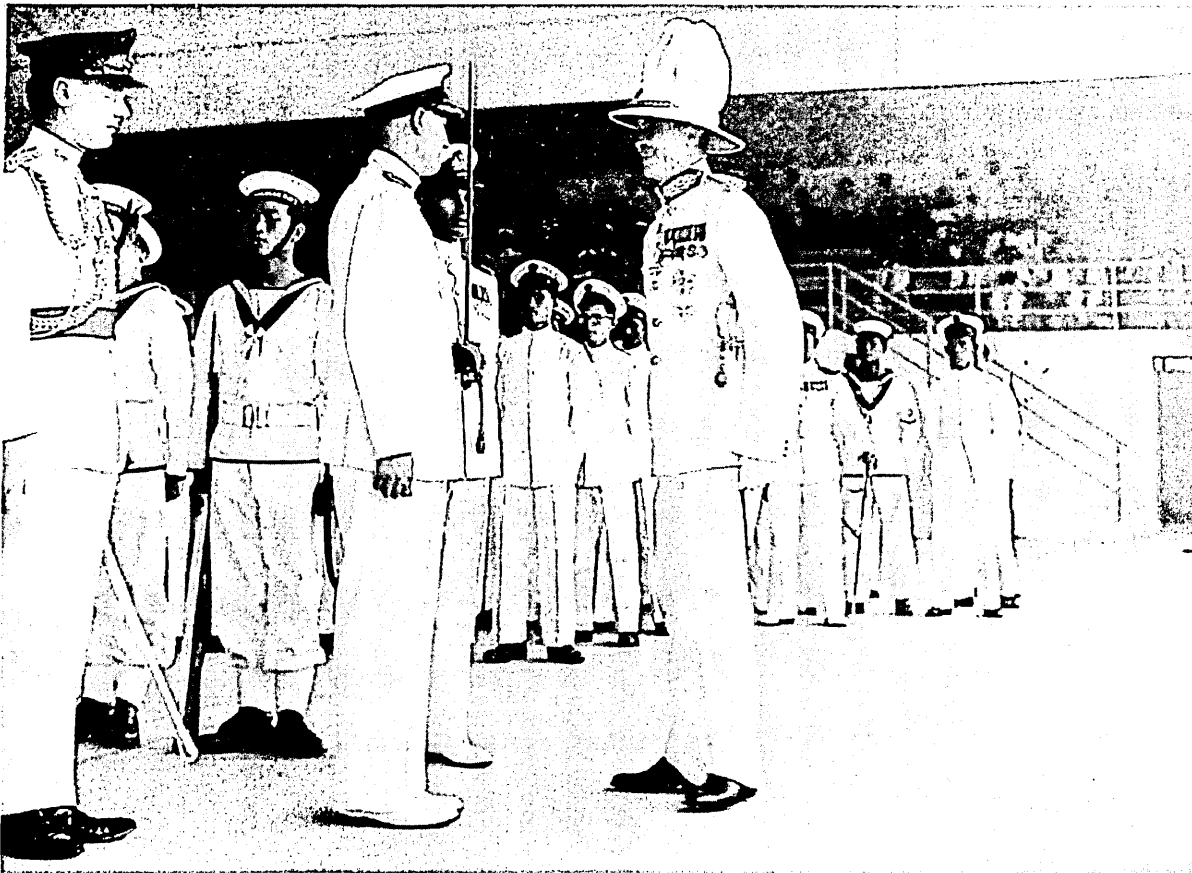


Image 15. The Royal Malayan Navy is transferred to the Federation of Malaya, inspected by the Governor of Singapore, Sir William Goode (right) [Source: The National Archive, INF 10/199, July 1958]

The 1946 Malayan Union, which was dissolved after just two years, proved a catalyst for Malay nationalism. It advocated the termination of the Malay rulers' sovereignty and the granting of equal citizenship rights to immigrant groups, which threatened the Malays' numerical status, and acted as a rallying call for the aristocratic Malay elite who championed the core markers of Malay identity: bahasa (Malay language), agama (religion), and raja (royalty)<sup>495</sup>. These markers have subsequently been constitutionally enshrined by the UMNO-dominant post-colonial government. Today they define the *bumiputra*, and by extension, who benefits from

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<sup>495</sup> Lily Zubaidah Rahim, 'Whose Imagined Community?: The Nation-State, Ethnicity and Indigenous Minorities in Southeast Asia', paper prepared for the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) Conference on *Racism and Public Policy*, September 2001, Durban, South Africa, p.8.

the affirmative action afforded the 'sons of the soil' under the aegis of the New Economic Policy (NEP). Though the NEP was launched in 1970, unofficially this institutionalised discrimination existed earlier in the context of Malaysia's armed forces, and by extension of that, the RMN.

Within a couple of months of being appointed Staff Officer (Personnel and Training) at the Ministry of Defence in 1966, Kuttan was asked to head up a selection panel to recruit 10 new officer cadets for the RMN to be sent to Dartmouth for training. Kuttan submitted his selections to the Armed Forces Council, which included only two Malays, the rest being either Indian or Chinese, only to have them rejected and be told to reconvene the panel, ensuring that he observed the quota of 7:2:1 – seven Malays, two Chinese, and one other - something he was not informed about upon his appointment. It was a significant shift from the heterogenous group first sent to Dartmouth of which Kuttan had been a member. Consequently he says that a lot of sub-standard officers were brought into the RMN, as the more capable Malays tended to look towards the civil service rather than the armed forces as a career. He argues that a quota system should never be imposed upon armed forces as ultimately lives were at stake, and the most capable men needed to be in command and appointed on merit<sup>496</sup>. This sentiment is echoed by Admiral Tan Sri Thanabalasingam, a Sri Lankan Tamil also part of the first Dartmouth batch, who became the first Malaysian chief of the Navy in 1967 and was also the only non-Malay to ever hold the top position in one of Malaysia's armed forces. He argues that the more a force is racially biased towards one race, it discourages others to join, and questions of loyalty arise:

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<sup>496</sup> Interview conducted by author with Chitharanjan Kuttan on 17 July 2009.

[They ask] "why should I serve and die, for what, for who?" If a force is meritocratic then loyalty will be automatic, but not if promotion is limited or if there is a quota on education. I'll fight for my country, [but] that sort of thing must be ingrained from a young age.<sup>497</sup>

Kuttan found his own promotion restricted as a result of the quota system he was expected to enforce. As a Lieutenant Commander he watched one of his junior officers rise quickly through the ranks until one Sunday the young officer walked into his office having just been promoted to Commander, offering his apologies and a sole explanation: 'Sir, I'm so sorry. I'm a Melayu'. Kuttan says he did not want to wait for the embarrassment of one day having his cadets writing reports on him and so in 1970 he left the RMN<sup>498</sup>.

Lieutenant Commander Karu also experienced watching the cadets he had trained being promoted above him:

Every other morning a junior would be promoted above you. A fresh Commander with half a dog watch, suddenly talks like one, trying to portray one, when he doesn't fit.<sup>499</sup>

Karu similarly decided to take early retirement from the force, due to what he saw as deteriorating standards forced about by *pro-bumiputra* policies. This extended to language, with everything having to be translated from English, however, Karu says that many Royal Navy terms could not be adequately translated into Bahasa Melayu. It was an example of service efficiency being compromised for the sake of politics.

Another enshrined marker of *bumiputra* identity, Islam, was also actively

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<sup>497</sup> Interview conducted by author with Tan Sri Thanabalasingam on 25 June 2009.

<sup>498</sup> Interview conducted by author with Chitharanjan Kuttan on 17 July 2009.

<sup>499</sup> Interview conducted by author with Karu Selvaratnam on 30 June 2009.

imposed on the force with contentious outcomes. According to Karu, 'everything had a religious implication' which consequently 'brought down standards', and although Karu was religious himself, he did not appreciate the move to religious favour away from the more meritocratic post-war model of the British, stating 'you can't sit down with a cup of coffee and a cigar and expect God to help you out when you're not doing anything'<sup>500</sup>. It could be inferred that the stereotype of the 'lazy Malay' still informs this preconception, a recurrence of deeply-engrained colonial ideologies which, according to Alatas, were never displaced during the country's independence movement and continued to inform and shape the post-colonial state:

The false consciousness distorts the reality. The Malay ruling party inherited the rule from the British without a struggle for independence... As such there was also no ideological struggle. There was no intellectual break with British ideological thinking at the deeper level of thought. The leadership of the party were recruited from the top hierarchy of the civil service trained by the British<sup>501</sup>

Central to the issue of Islam and the Navy were conflicting attitudes towards alcohol. Karu says a major motivation for him joining the Navy had been its camaraderie, and alcohol formed an important element in that respect, something which deteriorated with its banning. Not only that, but Karu argues that alcohol played an important role as a facilitator for the resolution of professional problems. At the end of the working day, they would meet in a bar and work out issues they had not had the chance to do whilst on-duty. When Karu joined the RMN in 1960 he describes the force as a 'very good mix, brothers in arms, everybody was doing the

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<sup>500</sup> Idem.

<sup>501</sup> Alatas, *The Myth of the Lazy Native*, p.152.

same things, we were playing together, working together, eating together, drinking together'. He says too much emphasis on the 'Islamic factor' eroded this, and worried the significant number of non-Malays in the force:

We lost a lot of good officers, some left and others were bypassed. I was one of them who was disillusioned with what I was watching. I said: "What am I doing here wasting my time, I think I'd better get out", because I would have rotted there for another five or six years. It was a good thing I left. I sometimes regret not leaving earlier.<sup>502</sup>

Admiral Thanabalasingam also appreciated the shifting emphasis of the force from when he joined in 1955 as one of the first Malaysian officers to be sent to Dartmouth:

Everyone drank at the time. It's not so acceptable now to say Malays drank, at that point in time the culture was different. We considered them good Muslims at the time because we didn't realise anyway. In Malaysia today we've become more religious from an Islamic point of view and more sensitive to these things. We toasted the king with wine and champagne at mess dinner, that was done away with a long time ago. The official toast is now done with water. Things have changed drastically.<sup>503</sup>

Like Karu, Thanabalasingam advocated that alcohol helped develop the social attributes required to be good officers, something instilled in him at Dartmouth.

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<sup>502</sup> Interview conducted by author with Karu Selvaratnam on 30 June 2009.

<sup>503</sup> Interview conducted by author with Tan Sri Thanabalasingam on 25 June 2009.



During his days as RMN chief, he would often punish officers "who could not hold their drinks. I was harsh, more so to discipline and make them credible sailors"<sup>504</sup>.

It was Thanabalasingam's successor as Chief of the Navy, Admiral Mohd Zain bin Mohd Salleh, who banned grog from the wardroom and mess, a man Kuttan had been particularly close too:

We were close buddies as cadets and shipmates. On leave we would buy a bottle of brandy or whisky and drink it on the train, straight from the bottle. For him to agree to that policy I don't understand... It was a very big thing in the social life of the men and the officers. It affected their morale... the non-Malays and even some Malays themselves. Sentiments were expressed like "what the heck, what next am I going to be deprived of?" On that basis some retired early.<sup>505</sup>

A recurring theme throughout this chapter, and spanning both colonial Malaya and postcolonial Malaysia, is the identification of Malays as a 'seagoing' race, first by the British and then by the *bumiputra*. The concept of the 'sons of the soil' as previously mentioned is worth particular consideration in this context, not only because the inference of the term seems to contradict the construction of the seafaring Malay, but also because it provided British validation to Malay claims for primacy over the land. It is also a contentious issue if you include Singapore within such assertions, which one has to do considering that was where all the local naval forces were based predominantly, as the dominant ethnic group on the island were

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<sup>504</sup> Adrian David, "Old horse' Thanabalasingam touched by award from King", 21 June 2007, poobalan.com, <http://poobalan.com/blog/indian/2007/06/21/old-horse-thanabalasingam-touched-by-award-from-king/>

<sup>505</sup> Interview conducted by author with Chitharanjan Kuttan on 17 July 2009.

not Malays but in fact Chinese. Though indeed the Chinese population had been built up through immigration over a century, this was also the case with the Indians, and it can be argued, that though a small community of around 1,000 Orang Seletar<sup>506</sup> inhabited the island when the British settled, they were a group distinct from the mainland Malay population who also settled later.

One way that the *bumiputra* sought to legitimise the Islamisation of the Navy and extension of the quota system, was by appropriating both colonial and pre-colonial cultural markers. In a naval variation on martial race theory, there had been a belief amongst the British at the turn of the century that Malays were an innately 'seafaring' people, rhetoric which was articulated with increased vigour during the 1930s when Malays were first recruited into the original naval forces. Even today this stereotype is celebrated by Malaysia in books, museums and public commemoration. This identity is essentially rooted in the fundamental role played historically by Malay merchants and pirate mercenaries in shaping the fortunes of the Malacca Straits, upon whose favour the power and influence of the region's Sultanates traditionally rested. The most celebrated of these maritime heroes was Hang Tuah, who has become an icon for Malay nationalism for his famous rallying cry: "Malays will never vanish from the face of the earth". Yet, Hang Tuah was not 'Malay' in the contemporary sense, nor were his fellow privateers. They were 'Orang Laut', or 'People of the Sea'<sup>507</sup>, boat-dwellers, who lived a rootless and nomadic existence from coast to coast, working either as a Sultan's hired navy, or as fishermen, traders,

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<sup>506</sup> A specific group of seafaring Malays (Orang Laut) who settled around the northern coast of Singapore.

<sup>507</sup> Cynthia Chou, *The Orang Suku Laut of Riau, Indonesia: The Inalienable Gift of Territory* (London, 2010), p.1.

and even tax collectors<sup>508</sup>. The Malay rulers bound the Orang Laut to them by forging kinship ties and bestowing titles and emblems of office, vital because of the Orang Laut's reputation for transferring their allegiance if it served their interests. By the mid-nineteenth century, with the declining influence of the Sultanates and the influx of British power, a large number of Orang Laut were forced to settle and find alternative work ashore, and became a minority not just among the indigenous peoples of Malaya, known collectively as the Orang Asli, but also the growing population of predominantly Muslim Malay immigrants from Sumatra and Java. The 1874 Treaty of Pangkor tied the concept of Malayness or 'Melayu', to the Islamic faith<sup>509</sup>, simultaneously disenfranchising the Orang Laut and Orang Asli from their Malay ethnicity. The Orang Laut became viewed negatively by the Melayu, as a 'dangerous, dirty and unprogressive people', whose nomadic life was deemed uncondusive to adhering to the Islamic faith, which can only be observed if one leads a sedentary lifestyle<sup>510</sup>. Yet, it was the Orang Laut who were the true seagoing Malays, not the Melayu who both under the British and post-independence have been framed as such.

It has been argued that 'globalization has induced new imagined communities that stress not merely continuity but also a resurgence of ancient traditions that go beyond past achievements to meet the challenges of modernity'<sup>511</sup>. The Orang Laut's nomadism has been contemporarily synonymised with economic backwardness due to their reticence to embrace the 'new Islam' preached by the state and legislatively

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<sup>508</sup> Geoffrey Benjamin, 'On Being Tribal in the Malay World', in Geoffrey Benjamin and Cynthia Chou (eds.), *Tribal Communities in the Malay World: Historical, Cultural and Social Perspectives* (Singapore, 2002), p.41, p.45.

<sup>509</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.43-44.

<sup>510</sup> Cynthia Chou, *Indonesian Sea Nomads: Money, Magic and Fear of the Orang Suku Laut* (London, 2003), p.2, p.143.

<sup>511</sup> Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception*, p.80.

tied to Malaysia's capitalist development and future prosperity. It is somewhat ironic that the Orang Laut, arguably pioneers of transnational trade, should find themselves estranged by modern Malaysia's attempts to integrate into a globalised economy. It has been emphasised by some scholars that 'history and memory can be used "instrumentally" to promote individual or collective interests':

In their struggle for power, competing elites use history as a tool to mobilize popular support. Ethnic categories can also be manipulated to maintain the power of a dominant group and justify discrimination against other groups. This manipulation of the past provides the opportunity to mold the present and the future.<sup>512</sup>

Social scientists have examined the political nature of ethnicity, and how colonial and post-colonial states have been instrumental in its social construction, flourishing under nationalism<sup>513</sup>. Eric Hobsbawm has argued that national histories are 'invented', while for Elie Kedourie 'nationalists make use of the past in order to subvert the present.'<sup>514</sup> It has been said that nation states are "built through purposeful racial, ethnic, religious, class, or other internal exclusions" such that the nationalization of society has tended to move in tandem with the racialization of society.<sup>515</sup> The identification of Malays as a 'seafaring race' fits within these paradigms, creating a distorting representation based upon the collaborative

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<sup>512</sup> Zheng Wang, 'National Humiliation, History Education, and the Politics of Historical Memory: Patriotic Education Campaign in China', *International Studies Quarterly* (2008), Vol.52, pp.783-806, p.786.

<sup>513</sup> Leonard Y. Andaya, *Leaves of the Same Tree: Trade and Ethnicity in the Straits of Melaka* (Honolulu, 2006), p.5.

<sup>514</sup> Peter Hays Gries, 'Narratives to Live By: The Century of Humiliation and Chinese National Identity Today', in Lionel M. Jensen and Timothy B. Weston (eds.), *China's Transformations: The Stories beyond the Headlines* (Plymouth, 2007), pp.113-4.

<sup>515</sup> Andrew Mark, *Making Race and Nation: A Comparison of the United States, South Africa, and Brazil* (Cambridge, 1998), p.273, cited in Hilbourne Watson, 'Theorizing the racialization of global politics and the Caribbean experience', *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, Vol.26, No.4 (Oct.-Dec. 2001), pp.449-83.

appropriation and manipulation of a minority group's cultural heritage and ethnic identity. The cultivation of an 'imagined community' of seafaring Malays benefitted the British, as by instilling a distorted sense of cultural pride and tradition, it broadened the popular resonance and appeal of naval service to a wider pool of potential recruits across the peninsula. It also acted to disbar the Orang Laut, for though they possessed nautical skills and had a reputation as feared fighters, these had been used to undermine British trade and the Royal Navy in previous centuries through piracy<sup>516</sup>. They distrusted the 'predatory habits to which these people have always been so addicted'<sup>517</sup> which when 'allured by the prospects of plunder [would cause] a renewal of practices so congenial to Malay habits'<sup>518</sup>. They were also known for their transient loyalty, and the Orang Laut were continually viewed with suspicion, seen to lack both the disciplined character and the reliability demanded by the Navy. This 'invented tradition' was embraced by Melayu nationalists, as by tying into the deeper cultural heritage of the indigenous Malay populations it legitimised their own claims for racial primacy in the decolonisation process, when in reality they were immigrants as much as the Chinese and Indian communities they sought to exceed.

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<sup>516</sup> Andaya, *Leaves of the Same Tree*, pp.192-4.

<sup>517</sup> Owen to Croker, 14/16 October 1830, cited in Nicholas Tarling, *Piracy and Politics in the Malay World* (Singapore, 1963), p.51.

<sup>518</sup> Presgrave to Muchisa, 5 Dec 1828, cited in *ibid.*, p.41.

## Conclusion

There can be little doubt that the prime impetus behind the formation of local naval forces in Southeast Asia was the construction of the Singapore naval base, though this connection was played down by both the Governor and imperial interests, notably the Admiralty and Colonial Office. The Admiralty's whole philosophy regarding colonial naval defence was dependent upon the willingness of colonial legislatures to contribute not just men, but money, towards the auxiliary units which could relieve imperial overstretch by releasing Royal Navy regulars for duty elsewhere. To acknowledge that such naval forces were tied to the base would be to admit that their presence was in imperial not local interests, and thus place their expense at the foot of the Imperial Government. The metropole thus needed local allies, such as the Governor and the Malay Sultans, to collaborate and support such schemes.

Justifications were made based on the local benefits derived from the creation of such naval forces, in this instance the opportunities they provided for the employment and social improvement of Malay youths. Yet such views were inherently prejudiced and influenced by racial ideology, in particular the myth of the 'lazy Malay'. The naval forces thus became purveyors of imperial paternalism, improving the condition and 'character' of the stagnant 'Oriental' through benevolent British instruction. While the loyalty of the Malays was secured through the Sultans, doubts existed regarding the other major ethnic groups, most notably the Chinese, who were seen to have potentially conflicting allegiances to the Kuomintang, Communists, or secret societies, and the Eurasians, who though they were

considered more trustworthy, were seen to be of varying quality due to their lack of racial purity, which would also undermine white British authority which defined the chain of command and the naval officer class. In order to justify the exclusions of such groups colonial authorities thus built up the image of Malays as a 'seafaring race', propagated through the media, which also served as a recruitment tool and broadcast the positive change that British naval training was bringing about.

Western-centric representations of the fall of Singapore have created a distorting historical memory of the battle that fails to properly acknowledge the role and actions of colonial volunteers. For the MRNVR, the battle was a costly but heroic one, more in keeping with the glorification of Dunkirk than Churchill's humiliating 'capitulation', where they continued the evacuation of civilians in the face of insurmountable odds, and in many cases paid the ultimate price in doing so. Yet, it was still only the white European officers who were subsequently awarded for their bravery, with the Malay ratings overlooked.

Those who did choose to stay with the British after the fall of Singapore did less so out of patriotic loyalty than self-preservation. Indeed, push factors generally appear more dominant than pull ones behind naval volunteer motives, whether they were escaping an abusive domestic life, religious custom, economic hardship, or Japanese retribution. Being away from home in Ceylon and coming into contact with other colonial troops highlighted comparative inequalities, with fragile imperial unity thus fragmenting and causing indiscipline. Rather than being 'brothers in arms' fighting for the same Empire in a common cause, they felt like 'friendless exiles in a foreign country'. Yet interestingly, protest did not form along ethnic lines, as in the case of the Caymanians. Instead, Malays were divided amongst themselves

according to their individual units which also had age and class associations, with the younger full-time Malay Navy against the more numerous and generally older MRNVR part-timers. 'Irrational' Malay behaviour was depicted in racially stereotypical terms, attributed to culture-bound syndromes such as *latah*, which reinforced British colonial rule. By drawing on the comforting 'knowledge' of imperial discourses of power, underlying concerns were masked regarding Britain's ability to reassert its control over Malaya, and elsewhere in the Empire, after the war. As in the Caribbean, there was a fear that American exposure could undermine British authority in the eyes of its colonial subjects. It was recognised that conciliation was needed in order to placate dissenting voices that might obstruct the British return. Thus the relative position and responsibilities of the Malay sailors was to be raised for them to spearhead 'Operation Zipper', but was never actually carried out due to the Japanese surrender.

The three original Malay naval units were disbanded after the war, only for a new full-time force, the MNF, to be formed a year later in response to the Emergency. The changing post-war geopolitical climate of the Cold War meant that old imperial ideologies had to be reevaluated. Whereas one might assume that concerns towards Chinese loyalty might be reinforced by the Communist insurgency, in fact it served to draw the non-Communist Chinese into closer sympathy with the colonial authorities by providing a common threat to their interests. To encourage this affiliation, the Navy thus opened up its formerly restrictive recruitment policy to include non-Malays. In doing so though it allowed secret societies, specifically the 18 gang, to spread within the organisation, encompassing Malay members as well as Chinese. The formerly repressed secret societies were able to flourish in post-war Singapore



because the British needed new collaborators to support their precarious returning colonial position, after their prestige had been shattered by Japan. Meanwhile, on the ground, and waves, individual British officers were bought off, and it was not until Lee Kuan Yew became prime minister in 1959 that serious action was taken to eradicate the gangs.

With Malaya gaining independence in 1957, responsibility for the RMN was transferred across to the new Government in Kuala Lumpur. Yet even though Britain no longer held formal authority over the force, it continued to exert informal influence. British officers still served in the RMN for another decade, particularly in the more senior positions, officially there to aid its transition to full nationalisation by training up its indigenous officers, but using their positions of authority to steer local procurement in the direction of British interests.

Nationalisation led to the Islamisation and politicisation of the RMN, with service efficiency and esprit de corps compromised for the UMNO's nation-building project. Yet this ushered in a new phase of institutionalised discrimination. As the pre-war British recruited solely Malays because of concerns regarding the other groups' potential loyalties and the threat this could pose to their authority, particularly the Chinese, the UMNO-led Government sought to sideline the non-*bumiputra* within the force to assure its allegiance to them and consolidate its political power base through affirmative action. Within the RMN, as elsewhere, this took the form of a quota system, disproportionate to the national demographic, and ostracised those non-Islamic Malay members within the force who suddenly found their promotion prospects impeded. As under the British, historical memory was manipulated to provide cultural validation for this preferential treatment, appropriating colonial

discourses to emphasise the innate seafaring qualities and heritage of the Malays. Yet this identity was displaced, and though traditional Malay groups such as the Orang Laut had strong maritime traditions, they were no longer considered 'Malay' in the contemporary sense because they were not Islamic, thus both their seafaring identity and Malay ethnicity was taken from them, while their celebrated ancestors such as Hang Tuah became rebranded to act as new Malaysia's nationalist heroes. Thus, one should question the extent to which Malaysia can be considered a 'postcolonial' state, a concept still intrinsically juxtaposed with Westerncentricism, when a form of *internal colonialism*<sup>519</sup> still exists within the country, after the 'blue water' imperialism of the British has ended? It could be argued that British paternalism worked too well, with the colonised effectively learning their tactics to become colonisers themselves.

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<sup>519</sup> *Internal colonialism* differs from classic colonialism (sometimes called blue water colonialism) in that in colonialism's classic form a small group of colonists occupy a land far from the colonial metropolis (*metropole*) and remain a minority, exercising control over a large indigenous population. By contrast, in internal colonialism, the native population is swamped by a large mass of colonial settlers who, after generations, no longer have a *metropole* to which to return.' Jace Weaver, 'Chapter 10: Indigenosity and Indigeneity', in Henry Schwarz and Sangeeta Ray (eds.), *A Companion to Postcolonial Studies* (Oxford, 2000), p.223.

## Case Study Three: East Asia

### Introduction

As previously emphasised, the main threat which preoccupied British naval thinking for most of the interwar period was presented by Japan, and colonial naval development largely emerged in response to the strategic overstretch that this created. This threat loomed larger for one colony in particular, situated virtually on Japan's doorstep: Hong Kong. This case study will focus on the Hong Kong Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve (HKRNVR), and how it developed not just in response to these external political and strategic pressures, but internal ones also. As discussed in the previous section, during this earlier period the Navy were reluctant to recruit Chinese into the Malayan and Straits Settlements' naval forces because of racial and cultural stereotypes, with particular concerns regarding their associations and loyalties. With an overwhelming Chinese majority in Hong Kong, their enlistment into the HKRNVR was unavoidable, yet prejudices remained which would continue to influence and inhibit the force into the 1960s, as Britain adjusted to the new threat posed by Mao's People's Republic of China. As this case study will demonstrate, the delicate balancing act that the Navy attempted in its recruitment and management of the HKRNVR reflected deeper imperial anxieties regarding British prestige, so shaken by the Second World War, and maintaining Britain's isolated position in that small enclave, surrounded by over half a billion 'Chinamen'.

Part One will analyse Hong Kong's naval development in relation to its broader East Asian context prior to 1945, addressing the following issues: force

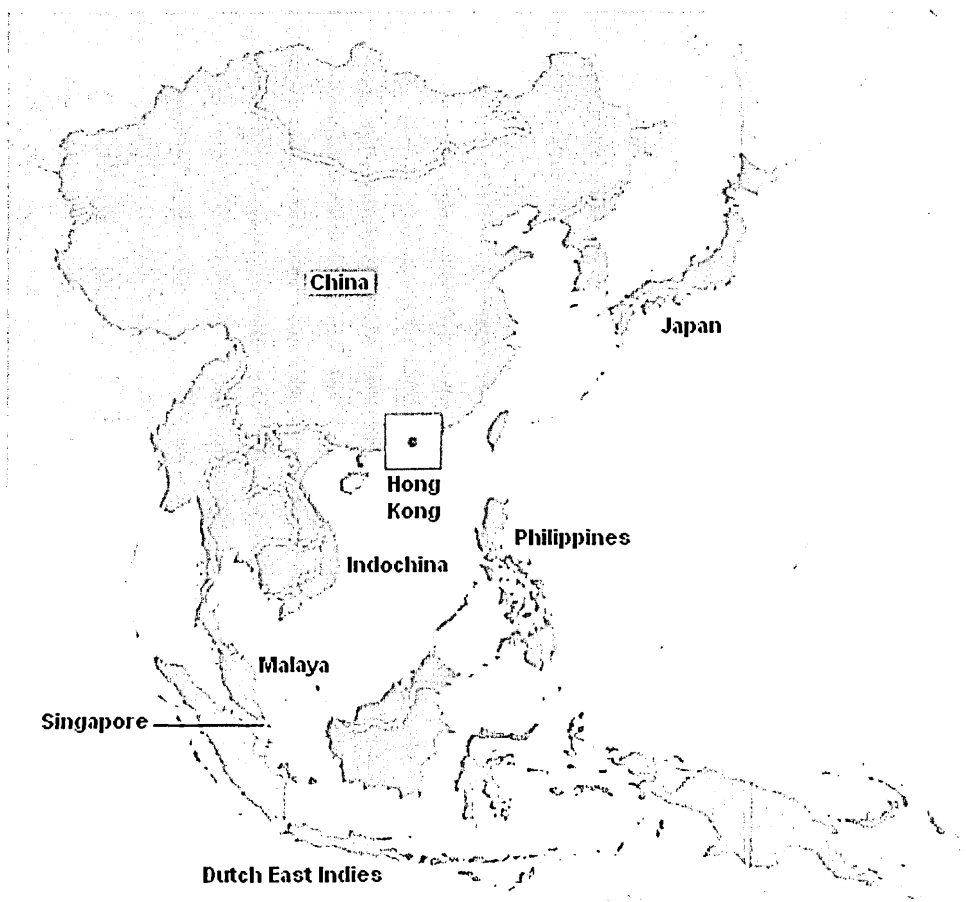
origins; the cultivation of colonial navalism; issues of force expansion and wartime mobilisation; perceptions of Chinese 'transient' loyalty; the 'heroic myth' of the 2<sup>nd</sup> MTB flotilla's escape; the view of military/naval service within Chinese culture; and the influence of Chinese historiographical trends on Hong Kong's historical memory of its naval conflict. Part Two examines the post-war evolution of Hong Kong's naval force as it adjusted to the after-effects of the Second World War and the changing geopolitical landscape, most notably Communist China's emergence and Britain's declining world role. It will address the following key themes: restoring imperial 'face'; the reconstitution of the force; racial grouping; compulsory service; riot and unrest; and disbandment.

#### Map 4. Hong Kong Territory



[Source: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/British\\_Hong\\_Kong](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/British_Hong_Kong)]

## Map 5. Hong Kong's location in East Asia



[Source: adapted from <http://www.have-feet-will-travel.com/Hong-Kong-Facts.html>]

## Origins

Records of early colonial navalism in Hong Kong are sparse, but by 25 April 1885 it is known that a seagoing Hong Kong Auxiliary Flotilla was raised by Governor Sir George Bowen, made up of volunteers from the Water Police, local yachtsmen, and with the Assistant Harbour-Master as Commodore. Though not officially affiliated to the senior service, the Royal Navy did lend its support to the endeavour. Two former gunboats, HMS *Tweed* and HMS *Wyvern*, were reconditioned for use as training vessels by the force, and an RN gunner took on the duties of gunner instructor to the force. A requisition order was placed by the Governor to the RN Commodore at Hong Kong for 'boats, signal books, signal flags and cones for the use of the Aux. Flotilla'. By 16 June 1885, the local Flotilla consisted of Government launches, including the *Daisy* and *Lilly*, which it was suggested should be fitted for the discharge of Whitehead torpedoes, with the recommendation that the volunteers should undertake a course of instruction by the resident RN Torpedo Lieutenant. This is the last known record relating to the Hong Kong Auxiliary Flotilla, however, and it was disbanded some time shortly after<sup>520</sup>.

In addition, during the nineteenth century, Chinese cooks and personal servants were unofficially employed directly by Royal Navy officers on station in East Asia. In 1905 this arrangement was formalised, with a Locally Enlisted Personnel

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<sup>520</sup> *South China Morning Post*, 24 October 1933, p.13.

(LEP) division established consisting of two Seamen Petty Officers, 50 Able Seamen, seven stokes and nine Mess Boys.<sup>521</sup> These were full-time servicemen appointed to Royal Navy vessels, and operated outside of colonial jurisdiction and so will not be the focus of this study, however, the distinction needs to be made.

It was not until the interwar years that more serious discussion took place regarding local naval volunteerism in reaction to the shifting political, economic and strategic climate. The imposition of Article XIX of the 1922 Washington Treaty, whereby no new defensive fortifications could be constructed in Hong Kong had raised the possibility of forming a local branch of the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve in lieu. At the 1925 Flag Officers Conference in Singapore, it was noted that insufficient consideration had been given to Hong Kong's defence relative to the priority accorded Singapore<sup>522</sup>. Despite some pessimistic predictions from the Admiralty, the General Officer Commanding, Hong Kong, suggested that if the naval defence provision was increased, the colony could potentially hold out. In February the following year, the new Governor Sir Cecil Clementi advanced this case by emphasising Hong Kong's strategic importance as a naval anchorage, being 'the only defended advanced base from which operations could be conducted against Japan'. Key assets were its large repair facilities and eight docks, and its role as a convoy assembly point able to equip armed merchantmen. During a European war, Hong Kong would act as a contraband control base. Moreover, in the event of war in the East, it was emphasised that the colony would be exposed to 'the maximum scale of attack', and therefore needed to take all possible precautions available to

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<sup>521</sup> Commodore P.J. Melson, CBE, Royal Navy (ed.), *White Ensign - Red Dragon: The History of the Royal Navy in Hong Kong 1841-1997*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Hong Kong, 1997), p.105.

<sup>522</sup> TNA, ADM 116/3121, 'Flag Officers at Singapore Conference', 1925, p.18.

defend itself<sup>523</sup>. Despite this, in view of the 'special expenditure involved in the construction of an aerodrome at Hong Kong and the grave depression in the trade of the Colony', the Colonial Secretary was unable to sanction the necessary expenditure for the RNVR scheme, which was 'postponed until conditions are more favourable'<sup>524</sup>. Yet local culture was also blamed in the form of Hong Kong's 'usual "maskee" spirit', an ethnically-characterised form of indifference associated with the Chinese, which had 'let the matter [of the RNVR] drift as one of those things which will be attended to in due course'<sup>525</sup>. *Maskee* is roughly translated as 'don't mind'<sup>526</sup>. It was considered a negative trait, used to derogate the Chinese, and can be considered as part of the broader Orientalist discourse underpinning western hegemony in the East:

It is "Maskee, maskee," all the time in China. If a stone bridge has tumbled down, and a great part of the population is put a couple of miles out of its path during year after year, maskee. If a house falls and blocks a highway, "Maskee," says everyone, and there the heap lies. "Maskee" is what you are told if you suggest that some one go to the help of a man or a woman in dire trouble. And even when a foreign power, without warrant or excuse, wages war upon the Northern strongholds of the empire, "Maskee," says all the rest of China.<sup>527</sup>

In this account, foreign imperialism is seen as a direct consequence of Chinese lethargy and lack of moral and social conscience, qualities the civilising mission

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<sup>523</sup> TNA, CO 129/505/2, Item 12, 'Committee of Imperial Defence - Hong Kong Local Forces: Note by the Naval Staff', 26 September 1927, p.1.

<sup>524</sup> TNA, CO 129/505/2, Item 23, From the Admiralty to the Colonial Office, 22 August 1927.

<sup>525</sup> *China Mail*, 6 August 1926, p.6.

<sup>526</sup> Mamie Meredith, 'Longfellow's "Excelsior" Done into Pidgin-English', *The American Dialect Society*, vol.5, no.2 (December, 1929), pp.148-151, p.149.

<sup>527</sup> Julian Ralph, *Alone in China, and other stories* (London, 1897), p.70



claimed to be instilling. China's dominance by the West is therefore seen here as the result of a combination of Western activity and Chinese passivity, each an equally culpable element in a collaborative restructuring of power, even though a large degree of that collaboration may have been unconscious or indirect.

By relating *maskee* to inefficiency in the Governmental bureaucratic process, however, which included a legislative council without a Chinese voice on it, this characterisation transcended its ethnically-bound roots to influence Hong Kong's European population. It undermined white prestige in the sense that faith in the administrative process was being questioned, partly due to apparent inactivity over the establishment of a Hong Kong Naval Reserve. It also resonated with Victorian beliefs about the morally-corruptive atmosphere of the 'Orient', and the negative influence that this could exert upon British character. This seemed to be reflected in the inaction and irresponsibility of the Hong Kong Government on the issue of colonial naval defence, laying it open to criticism that it was failing in its patriotic duty to help the 'motherland' in her defence of the Empire, a prominent theme in Imperial Defence Committee meetings earlier that year. During those, the Dominions reiterated their willingness to shoulder 'a burden which was growing increasingly heavy on the Home taxpayers - the maintenance of naval vessels and personnel', but the colonies were now expected to play their part too:

Hong Kong is hardly in a position to build ships or to shoulder more than a small part of the cost of Imperial Defence but the formation locally of a

RNVR would give local people the opportunity of indicating their willingness to do what is in their power.<sup>528</sup>

Arguments for the additional social benefits such service would provide beyond the strategic evinced themselves, notably 'it would provide young fellows with invaluable experience and the opportunity of healthful relaxation and exercise'. Those with most to gain from the establishment of a local reserve force, the Royal Navy, on the back of the Governor's initial announcement and in hope of influencing the decision-making process, were quick to voice their practical and moral support for such a scheme by offering the loan of personnel and two mine laying sloops, and getting public support on-side through the local press:

Hong Kong, as His Excellency remarked at the time, as one of the most important outposts of the Empire, is dependent for its prosperity on the maintenance of its shipping connections, it is to be hoped that this promise of the naval authorities will be made use of and that the whole thing will not fall through for lack of interest on the part of the powers that be.<sup>529</sup>

There was a slight contradiction, however, in one of the arguments proffered, most notably the benefit it would have towards the 'young fellows' of the colony, as the potential recruits identified were the 'several ex-naval men at present resident in the Colony', and members of the Royal Hong Kong Yacht Club, who would 'provide other enthusiasts with the advantage of a knowledge of our local coasts', men who already derived the lauded benefits for self and social improvement.

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<sup>528</sup> *China Mail*, 6 August 1926, p.6.

<sup>529</sup> *Idem*.

In reaction to the Colonial Office's 'postponement' of the RNVR scheme, the Admiralty were keen to stress the potential ramifications, with issues of imperial overstretch dominating. It was admitted that in the event of war, the Navy would struggle to meet its operational requirements 'without the assistance of a number of RNVR Officers and a minesweeping vessel' in Hong Kong. It also threatened 'the Admiralty policy of encouraging Colonies to assist in Naval defence', being a 'precedent which may be expected to react adversely on the willingness which other Colonies were also beginning to show, to prepare to form their own minesweeping units'. Finally, it was stated that the enthusiasm of those men who had volunteered from the Yacht Club, 'will have been very effectually damped, and the revival of the proposal in the future rendered difficult'<sup>530</sup>, though this conclusion was inaccurate as it would transpire.

The proposal for a HKRNR force resurfaced again three years later in more concrete form when it was included in the draft estimates of expenditure for the Legislative Council. These amounted to \$25,488 per annum, which included \$2,832 for personal emoluments, to be split between an officer instructor, a warrant officer, two petty officers, a clerk and a messenger, \$6,000 for cruising, \$4,000 for ammunition, \$6,600 for uniforms, and \$960 for the formation of a drill ground at the proposed headquarters to be based at the Royal Hong Kong Yacht Club. A sum of \$2,800 was also earmarked for fitting out the rescue tug, *Kau Sing*, for use by the force<sup>531</sup>. The proposal, however, was not 'considered on its merits. The dollar had slumped and economy was called for - so the RNVR scheme perished along with the

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<sup>530</sup> TNA, CO 129/505/2, Item 23 and 24, From the Admiralty to the Colonial Office, 22 August 1927.

<sup>531</sup> *Hong Kong Telegraph*, 6 September 1929, p.1.

Saikung road and other seeming extravagances<sup>532</sup>. It was not only economic factors that again counted against it. Traditional inter-service rivalry between the Army and Navy and parochial self-interest raised its head, with military circles voicing their opposition to the proposed force, fearing the effect it would have on their own recruitment:

We are of the opinion that the formation of the RNVR may to a certain extent detrimentally affect the Volunteers Defence Corps, and that Corps serves a far more useful and practical purpose. We consider that the RNR is unnecessary here and that Naval work should be left to the Navy; and we shall vote against the item for its establishment in the Appropriation Bill for 1930.<sup>533</sup>

There existed, therefore, a lack of either local understanding or concern for the issues of imperial defence, the operational overstretch that existed, and the strategic role that such a naval reserve would play in helping ease that burden. Colonial expectation was that the Royal Navy would continue to defend Hong Kong from naval threats, despite the notion running contrary to the Navy's primary expeditionary mission, intercepting an enemy on the high seas before it could threaten ports. In fact, such assumptions had been reinforced in 1924, when Admiral Richmond, seeing Hong Kong as Japan's primary target in a potential war, stated: 'In my opinion the strategical situation which would result from the loss of Hong Kong does not justify withholding naval forces if by their action they could contribute towards preventing its loss'<sup>534</sup>. It was thus considered that 'naval forces had to play a

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<sup>532</sup> *South China Morning Post*, 8 September 1933, p.12.

<sup>533</sup> *The China Mail*, 19 September 1929, p.6.

<sup>534</sup> TNA, ADM 116/6125, 'Remarks on Paragraphs in Detail, Part 1', p.3.

significant role in the defence of the colony, despite the long-established policy of not tying naval forces to local defence of bases<sup>535</sup>. To a large degree this was influenced by the weak state of Hong Kong's physical defences, which could not be drastically improved due to Article XIX<sup>536</sup>.

### **Cultivating Colonial Navalism**

By mid-1933, despite several false starts, there still existed no permanent naval volunteer force in Hong Kong. This was partly attributed to a 'lack of contact between the Navy and the Hong Kong community, with a resulting absence of understanding and friendship', considered 'extraordinary at a naval base and inexplicable in view of the fact that the Colony is unquestionably ship-minded'<sup>537</sup>. Blame was apportioned to both 'the community for its selfishness and the Navy for its exaggerated independence and its traditional silence', though it was observed that naval men who had left the service in Hong Kong had been 'absorbed with a peculiar facility into local life, demonstrating that there is no great difficulty'<sup>538</sup>. The catalyst for change was in the appointment of a new Commodore in charge at Hong Kong, Commodore Frank Elliot OBE, a descendent of Captain Charles Elliot, the first administrator of the colony, and perhaps this personal connection made him more adept at and attuned to navigating local conditions. It is he who is accredited with the

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<sup>535</sup> Ibid., 'Part II', p.5.

<sup>536</sup> Andrew Field, *Royal Navy Strategy in the Far East, 1919-1939* (London, 2004), pp.61-2.

<sup>537</sup> *South China Morning Post*, 8 September 1933, p.12.

<sup>538</sup> Idem.

shift in the Navy, 'liberalising its local outlook and entering more deeply into the Colony's consciousness'<sup>539</sup>.

In 1933, despite the shackles of the Washington Treaty and uncertainty over the colony's defensibility in an East Asian war, the Admiralty acknowledged to the Commander-in-Chief, China Station, Admiral Sir F. C. Dreyer, Hong Kong's importance as a base for protecting Britain's Chinese interests and for enabling the Royal Navy to operate in Japanese waters<sup>540</sup>. Upon his appointment that same year, Commodore Elliot was called by Dreyer, and told that he had to 'get the RNVR proposal going', but he faced similar problems to 1929:

One difficulty is finance. Another and more serious one is that though personnel exists it is otherwise committed. There has always been sign of jealousy between different auxiliary units. It is argued that the VDC would be more usefully employed as Special Police: and the Volunteers themselves are frequently appealing for recruits.<sup>541</sup>

As had happened four years earlier, traditional rivalries and parochialism meant that in order to implement the scheme, Elliot had to first surmount the obstructive moves of the Hong Kong military, centred around the Royal Hong Kong Regiment or 'The Volunteers', who viewed the creation of a 'rival' naval volunteer force as a threat to their own recruitment interests:

Looking at the past history it appeared that every time the question of a Naval Defence Force had come before the Council it was squashed by the General, who also represented the three services on the Council,

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<sup>539</sup> Idem.

<sup>540</sup> Field, *Royal Navy Strategy in the Far East*, p.102.

<sup>541</sup> *South China Morning Post*, 8 September 1933, p.12.

unless the C-in-C was present. Commodore Hong Kong was not on the council. It therefore seemed that somehow or other I had to "get" at Members before the meeting and get the Governor on my side.<sup>542</sup>

Elliot's solution was to throw a 'Red, White and Blue" cocktail party for the wives of all the leading 'Taipans'<sup>543</sup>, and after several rounds making an impassioned speech, saying that 'the women of the Colony were the brains of the Colony, etc., that every time this question came up their menfolk were browbeaten by the General (Barret) into turning the scheme down on the grounds that it would interfere with the Local Defence Force'<sup>544</sup>. After convincing the wives to get their husbands to vote in Council for the formation of the Force being started, Elliot then produced the Secretary of the Hong Kong branch of the Navy League who signed on not only the wives, but also their husbands in lieu, raising their membership from just ten members to over one hundred overnight. When the question was raised again in Council and put to a vote, 'much to the disgust of the General it was carried unanimously... I don't think he ever forgave me for... as he said... completely out manoeuvring him'<sup>545</sup>.

Commodore Elliot followed up on this by arranging a meeting at the Royal Hong Kong Yacht Club at 17.30 on Thursday 28 September 1933, to sound out potential recruits for the force. Over sixty men attended, following up on interest expressed the last time the scheme was raised:

"You can count on me up to the hilt," said the Commodore.

"Anything I can do to further the scheme I will do. I have been

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<sup>542</sup> Public Records Office of Hong Kong (PROHK), HKRS 6-1-1695, Letter from Rear Admiral F. Elliot to Commander F. Warrington-Strong, HKRNR, 26 February 1967.

<sup>543</sup> Tai-pan = foreign businessmen.

<sup>544</sup> Idem.

<sup>545</sup> Idem.

talking to the heads of shipping concerns and I feel sure we shall get support from them. They realise that in summer it will actually benefit a man's health as well as promote his training as a Naval Volunteer if he goes away for a few days fresh air on an anti-piracy patrol." The Commodore then made some observations with a view to making it clear to the layman that the Colony cannot be adequately defended solely by land forces. In time of emergency the greater part of the China Fleet might have to go elsewhere and there was definite need for a nucleus of men who knew something about minesweeping and could keep channels clear.<sup>546</sup>

Here again, health and the resulting social benefits to the colony were utilised to attract support. It would also appear that the message had an additional political agenda, with Commodore Elliot addressing not merely the assembled congregation, who by their nature as yachtsmen could hardly be considered 'laymen', but also through the local press the Hong Kong Government and wider public, less knowledgeable about naval affairs, suffering from that aforementioned 'absence of understanding and friendship', and perhaps susceptible to the military's propaganda.

Furthermore, this absence of friendship had begun to border on distrust amongst the ruling elites, who for the first time found their basic assumptions of British supremacy being challenged from within<sup>547</sup>. A growing number of 'mavericks' were beginning to side actively with the Asian population during the 1930s, and one of these had been a Royal Navy officer. C.M. Faure was a Commander stationed in

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<sup>546</sup> *South China Morning Post*, 30 September 1933, p.16.

<sup>547</sup> Philip Snow, *The Fall of Hong Kong: Britain, China and the Japanese Occupation* (London, 2003), p.19.



Canton before resigning from the service in 1928. Having been involved in the Navy's suppression of Chinese demonstrators in Shamian three years previously, it was believed that this had awoken him to the 'cruder manifestations of British power'. He had since moved to Hong Kong, where he 'went native' in the eyes of his fellow expatriates, 'living among the Chinese in the Wanchai district and advising members of the banned leftist unions in their collisions with the colony's Government'<sup>548</sup>.

Elliot's naval reserve and his courting of the taipans' wives and local yacht club were part of a larger co-ordinated strategy to turn colonial thoughts seaward and foster a greater integration and understanding between the local community and the Navy, so as to offset such destabilising influences. It has been argued by Nicholas Rodger that 'the demands of sea power were not only greater... but fell upon a much wider cross-section of society, and required a much greater degree of social, political, and administrative integration than armies did'. Therefore, whereas 'a military regime could sustain itself by force... a navy had to earn public support. Autocracy was adequate for an army, but navies needed consensus', and thus the Navy became associated with liberalism<sup>549</sup>. This need for consensus also applies to Elliot in Hong Kong, for in order to combat Barret's military autocracy he had to win the public over to his naval scheme. The first public turnout for the embryonic Hong Kong Naval Volunteer Force (HKNVF) as it was initially known, was thus coincided with the inaugural Hong Kong 'Navy Week', another of Elliot's ideas, bookended by Trafalgar Day on Saturday 21 October, and Hong Kong's first ever 'Navy Day' the following Saturday, based along the lines of the popular naval exhibitions of the same name

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<sup>548</sup> Idem.

<sup>549</sup> N.A.M. Rodger, *The Safeguard of the Sea: A Naval History of Great Britain*, vol. 1, 660-1649 (London, 1997), p.432, in Jeremy Black, 'A Post-Imperial Power? Britain and the Royal Navy', *Orbis*, Vol.49, No.1 (Spring, 2005), pp.353-65, pp.355-6.

celebrated back in Britain. Doubts were raised in some quarters that though 'the idea itself is not new, and has been advocated from time-to-time - optimists have even wondered whether there is not sufficient keenness to enable public interest to last a whole week'<sup>550</sup>. Elliot, however, was more sanguine about 'Navy Week's fortunes, not just regarding its popular appeal, but also in achieving its immediate material goal; he 'hoped that as a result of the celebrations, a sufficient number of people would agree to join' the new naval force, and 'there would be a good turn out of prospective volunteers on Trafalgar Day to show the Governor and the Civil Lord of the Admiralty, who would be in Hong Kong that day, that the Colony was earnest in this matter'<sup>551</sup>. Up to then, Trafalgar Day 'has fallen to become one of Britain's minor anniversaries':

In Hong Kong in some years there was nothing to mark it except a display of flags afloat, whose message did not penetrate far into the civilian consciousness: and in some other parts of the Empire the day was not observed at all... what the Navy means to the Colony it should not be necessary to emphasise. After the war, there were frequent expressions of hope that the celebration would be more elaborate here and for many years there had been talk of a naval "tattoo" - not merely for our entertainment, but to keep interest alive and cement the feelings of companionship and interdependence of the Silent Service and the civilian community...<sup>552</sup>

The optimistic view that 'there is unquestionably much scope for cooperation' in Hong Kong was fuelled by the reestablishment of the local branch of the Navy

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<sup>550</sup> *South China Morning Post*, 21 October 1933.

<sup>551</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>552</sup> *South China Morning Post*, 23 October 1933, p.12.

League in 1923, and successful fundraisers the following year with a Flag Day and a Grand Concert. It was admitted, however, that it was because of the combined impetus of 'the threat of another World War, and the co-operative spirit of our new and popular Commodore', that Hong Kong was viewing the Navy with increased sympathy:

The Navy remains the Empire's first line of defence, however, and there is nothing in the world situation today to justify neglect of preparedness... here in Hong Kong, however, far away from home without political influence, though likely to be uncomfortably close to the next war, we need not trouble ourselves with questions of consistency upon the armaments problem. Our role is to accommodate the fleet, its personnel, as well as its vessels. It is appropriate therefore that, whatever our views upon peace and war, we should cultivate comradeship with officers and men of the Navy: that, in fact, should be the principal object of the Hong Kong branch of the Navy League.<sup>553</sup>

It appears at this time that there was a strong public belief that war was not only possible, but probable, and though not mentioned specifically, the obvious insinuation was that the belligerent in such a conflict would be Japan, a view shared by the Admiralty. Back in London, however, the press reported that rather than being defensive and reactionary in its function and formation, the establishment of a RNVR force in Hong Kong actually fuelled tension in the Pacific<sup>554</sup>. Therefore, efforts were made to distance these public celebrations of the Navy from any negative association with jingoism, as 'in these days the Jingo has no friends, nor is it the

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<sup>553</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>554</sup> *Hong Kong Telegraph*, 25 October 1933, p.10.

intention to promote a war spirit'<sup>555</sup>. This can be viewed as symptomatic of the changing attitudes following the First World War, where the jingoism that accompanied the origins and early days of that conflict had become overshadowed by the spectre of death that it had brought.

Jim English's study of 'Empire Day in Britain, 1904-1958' offers a useful model for analysing the celebration of Trafalgar Day and Navy Week in Hong Kong. English's premise is that 'the survival of and (in some places) extension of Empire Day celebrations appears curious, given that its attendant militaristic rituals and jingoistic legacy appeared anachronistic after the catastrophe of the war'<sup>556</sup>. Such characteristics can also apply to Trafalgar Day. English argues that Empire Day's continued popular relevance can be attributed to 'its ability to connect with popular sentiment by means of cultural transformation', and its hegemonic function in presenting 'imperial identity as an effective counter to radical socialist or 'red' identity'<sup>557</sup>. In the first instance, rather than Trafalgar Day being a reaction to pre-existing popular sentiment, it was instead envisaged as playing a more active role in inculcating and shaping popular sentiment, namely, to increase awareness of and support for the Navy amongst an apathetic, or 'sea blind'<sup>558</sup>, Hong Kong public. As for English's latter explanation, within the context of Hong Kong, a predominantly Chinese community situated on the border of mainland China, which since 1927 had

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<sup>555</sup> *South China Morning Post*, 23 October 1933, p.12.

<sup>556</sup> Jim English, 'Empire Day in Britain, 1904-1958', *The Historical Journal*, Vol.49, Issue 1 (2006), pp.247-276, p.260.

<sup>557</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>558</sup> The concept of 'sea blindness', 'maritime blindness' and 'strategic myopia' are all terms which have proliferated within defence circles in recent years (the 'post-naval era') to describe an inability or unwillingness for a politic and/or public to perceive or give appropriate recognition to naval/maritime issues within its national strategic interest. For an introduction to this notion read Editorial, 'Maritime Blindness, You Say?', *Canadian Naval Review*, Vol.6, No.3 (Fall, 2010), pp.2-3. Though this is generally depicted as a contemporary phenomenon or 'pandemic', it seems to appropriately reflect the Royal Navy's perception of Hong Kong in 1933 and the years immediately preceding it.

been in a state of civil war between Kuomintang (KMT) - the Chinese Nationalist Party - and the Communist Party of China (CCP), this notion takes on an added ideological dimension.

The role of Trafalgar Day in fortifying imperial unity is reflected in Herfried Munkler's theory that 'the representation and attributed meaning of war as mediated through culture creates the idea of a common history and mutual solidarity'<sup>559</sup>. By drawing the Chinese community in Hong Kong closer to Britain, sentimentally as well as materially, they would in turn be drawn away from potential Communist sympathies from across the border, and the political and social threat that this posed to British rule in the colony.

In English's study, the First World War had led to the rebuttal of jingoism by new conventions of public behaviour, reflected by the inclusion of elements of Armistice Day into Empire Day's activities, namely the 'incorporation of solemn rites of remembrance'. Though the act of remembrance was incorporated into Trafalgar Day in Hong Kong, overall the celebratory mood of 'Navy Week' was anachronistic, and more in keeping with the pre-war Empire Day festivals, despite attempts to officially downplay any jingoistic overtones. It could be argued that the geographical, as well as personal distance of Hong Kong from the First World War, and the smaller proportion of the colony's population who would have lost their life there, meant that Hong Kong was shielded from the full horrors of that conflict, thus the act of remembrance lacked for them the same level of emotional intensity and was culturally displaced, more a foreign import than an act rooted in the fabric of the colony. In addition, a central aim for Elliot's 'Navy Week', was to attract volunteers to

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<sup>559</sup> Herfried Munkler, 'Nation as a model of political order and the growth of national identity in Europe', *International Sociology*, Vol.14, No.3 (September, 1999), pp.283-299, p.289.

the new naval volunteer force, and thus to focus too much attention on the prospect of death, especially through association with the Navy, either in a past or perceived future war, would have acted as a disincentive.

Hong Kong's 'Navy Week' benefitted from the support of the local press, who publicised the event via several naval-themed articles in the weeks leading up to and during the festivities. This naval fervour even penetrated the *South China Morning Post's* regular, 'World of Women' column, which carried an article exploring the fashion history of 'Sailors' Suits'<sup>560</sup>. A suggestion was proposed that 'ladies and girls in the Colony might make a special effort to include Navy blue in their costumes on these two days'<sup>561</sup>. 'World of Women' correspondent 'Abigail' reporting on Navy Day, lauded the displays arranged in the Naval Yard, marvelling that 'even the dress of the diver changes'<sup>562</sup>. Other items in the day's programme, 'designed with the object of affording the public opportunities to view the ships and some of their activities at close quarters thereby bringing the Colony of Hong Kong into close touch with the Royal Navy', included 'H.M. Ships Open to Visitors, H.M. Destroyers in Action, Destruction of Enemy Submarine, Engagement with Pirate Junk, Cinema showing Naval films, Amusement Park, [and] Various Nautical Tableaux'<sup>563</sup>.

This can be all viewed as an example of 'naval theatre', to draw on Jan Rüger's pioneering work. As Sir George Sydenham argued in 1898 that the representation of the Navy was 'one of the principal factors in promoting and maintaining the unity of Empire', the Admiralty became 'adamant that the naval

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<sup>560</sup> *South China Morning Post*, 5 October 1933, p.17.

<sup>561</sup> *Ibid.*, 16 September 1933, p.10.

<sup>562</sup> *Ibid.*, 31 October 1933, p.10.

<sup>563</sup> *Ibid.*, 16 September 1933, p.10.

theatre should be exploited for the fostering of imperial sentiment'<sup>564</sup>. Naval theatre could be deceptive, projecting 'an image of imperial strength that belied the strategic realities'<sup>565</sup>, notably imperial overstretch. By 'merging regional, national and imperial identities, the naval theatre provided an important stage for processes of cultural nation-building, at a time when shared visions of nationhood were contested both from within and without'<sup>566</sup>. It seemed to work; the newspapers were quick to proclaim the events an overwhelming success, that 'has aroused considerable public interest' in the 'silent service', and proved that 'Navy Week has a real significance' in Hong Kong<sup>567</sup>:

Highly reminiscent of Navy Week at Chatham or Portsmouth, the local Navy Day celebrations on Saturday will long remain as the most successful variety of entertainment ever provided in the Colony. Approximately 6,300 persons entered the Navy Yard between 1.30pm and 6pm, exceeding by far the highest anticipations. So dense were the throngs, particularly aboard HMS *Eagle*, that long queues had to be formed to control them. The happy inspiration that prompted the authorities to throw open the Naval Yard for the first time in local history has succeeded, in an unparalleled manner, in awakening interest in the Silent Service. At no point in the history of Hong Kong have relations between the Navy and the general public stood so high as they do today, and Navy Day, following so close upon Trafalgar Day, has undoubtedly

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<sup>564</sup> George Sydenham Clarke, quoted in Jan R ger, *The Great Naval Game: Britain and Germany in the Age of Empire* (Cambridge, 2007), pp.175-6.

<sup>565</sup> *Ibid.*, p.241.

<sup>566</sup> *Ibid.*, p.182.

<sup>567</sup> *South China Morning Post*, 26 October 1933, p.11.

cemented the bonds of friendship that have grown rapidly during the past few months.<sup>568</sup>

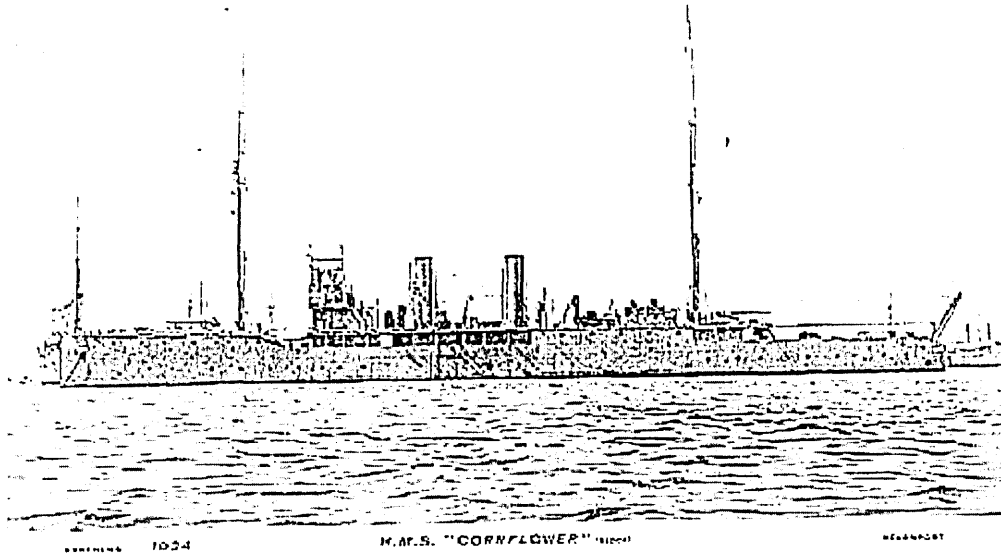


Image 16. HMS *Cornflower* [Source: <http://www.clydesite.co.uk>]

Elliot's motivations may not have been entirely altruistic or service-concerned, however. As with other imperial missionaries on the frontiers of Empire, such as Cardinal, he was also guided by his own legacy. The Royal Navy presented the HKNVF on 31 March 1934 with the First World War sloop HMS *Cornflower* on permanent loan to serve as its drill ship. Elliot used this to commemorate for perpetuity his status as founder of the HKNVF and its successors when he 'kindly granted permission to embody his family insignia and motto in a new crest for the Force'. The Elliots are one of the most famous Scottish border clans. Thus 'the facsimile of the head of the Cornflower was replaced by that of a forearm and hand wielding a scimitar. The scroll with the motto "FORTITER ET RECTE" ["Bravely and Right"] was added'<sup>569</sup>. This branding of the force with Elliot's family crest was not merely a vainglorious act of self-validation, but also cemented the long connection

<sup>568</sup> Ibid., 30 October 1933, p.11.

<sup>569</sup> PROHK, HKRS 6-1-1695, Item 2, 'HKRNVR Crest'.



between Hong Kong and the Elliot family, stretching back to the moment Captain Charles Elliot had first negotiated the acquisition of the island for Britain and acted as its first administrator. In doing so, it not only celebrated the Elliot family's historical role in shaping the colony, but redressed the public humiliation served by Lord Palmerston, who disapproving of the terms negotiated by Charles Elliot, dismissed him and denounced the island as 'a barren rock with nary a house upon it'. Hong Kong's subsequent prosperity had vindicated Charles Elliot's vision, a fact now demonstratively embedded within the new naval force and restoring the Elliot clan's honour, an important concept within the lineage of military/naval dynasties.

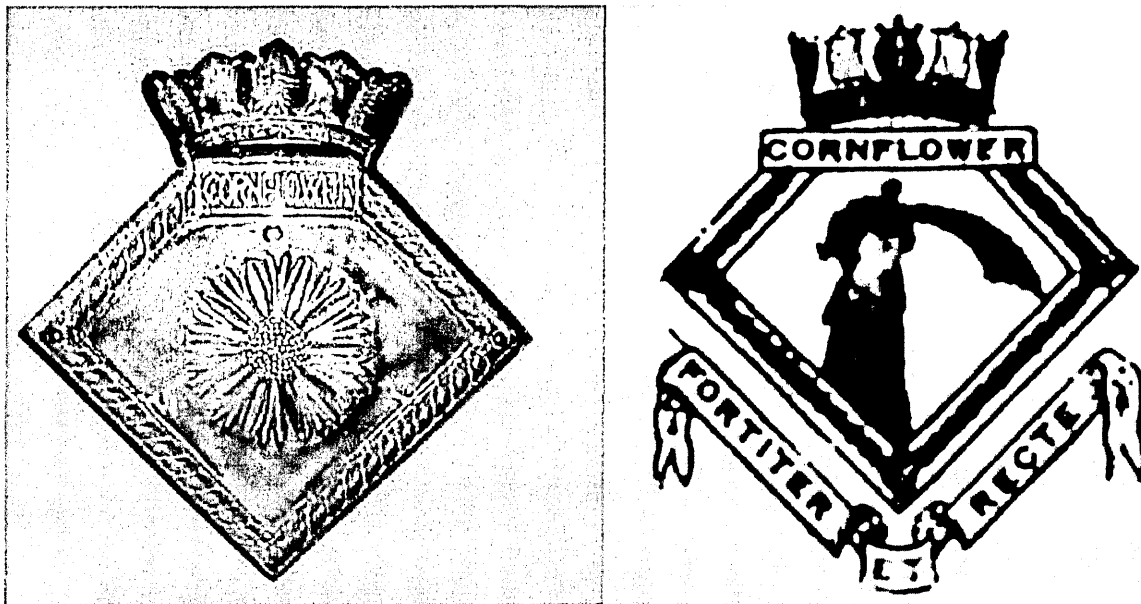


Image 17. The original crest of HMS *Cornflower* (left) and the HKRNVR version incorporating the Elliot family crest and motto (right) which remained in use until the force's disbandment [Sources: <http://www.hongkongescape.org> and PROHK, HKRS 41-2-296]

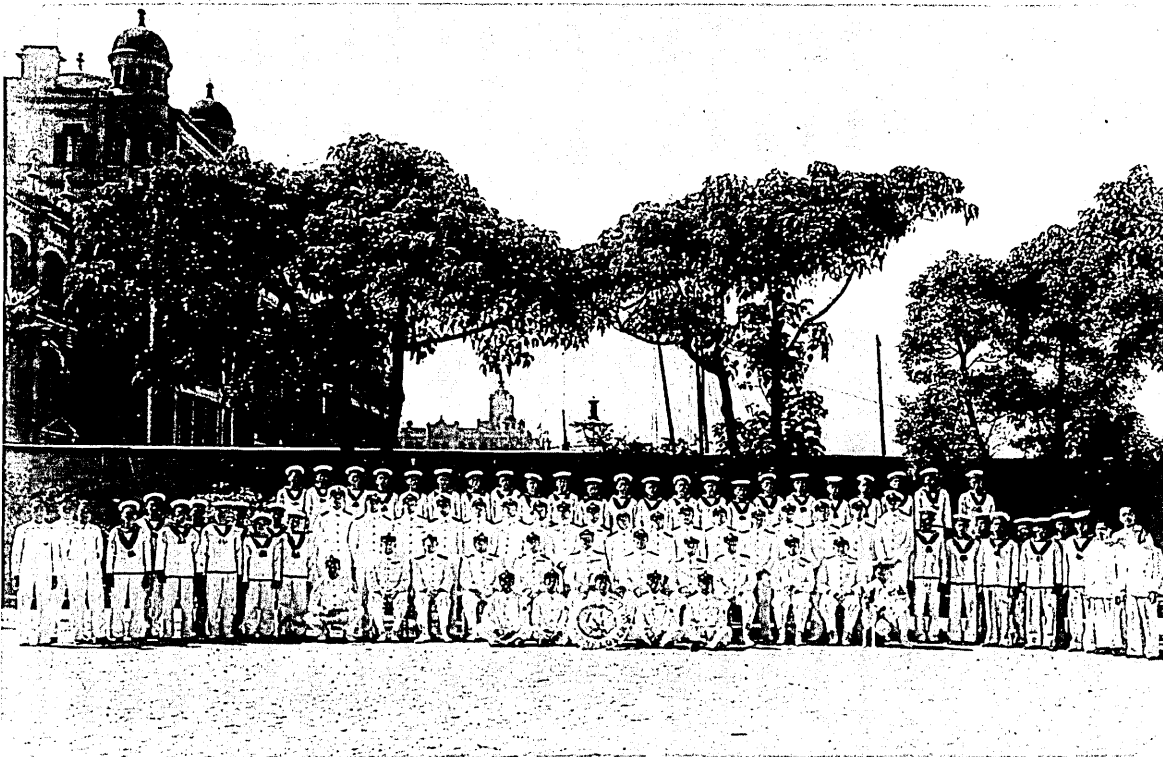


Image 18. The Hong Kong Naval Volunteer Force in the grounds of the naval college, 6 November 1934 [Source: TNA, CN 1/14/61]

## Force Expansion

The acquisition of the *Cornflower* again raised issues regarding Article XIX, as a result of the deteriorating material condition of the aging vessel. Though in her capacity as the force's headquarters, *Cornflower* did not have to remain seaworthy, the stipulations of the treaty that 'no new fortifications shall be established in the territories specified' meant that the vessel could 'not be allowed to degenerate to a hulk so that she can be considered part of the fixed defence of Hong Kong'<sup>570</sup>. As the conditions of the loan had not included the cost for maintenance of the propelling

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<sup>570</sup> TNA, ADM 116/4343, M. 05094/35, From Commander-in-Chief, China to The Commodore, Hong Kong, 2 December 1934.

machinery, this resulted in financial wrangling between the Colony and the Admiralty as to who was liable, with the cost ultimately falling on the Hong Kong Government. From an initial estimate of \$15,000 per annum, the cost of the ship's upkeep over five years amounted to \$120,000, approximately half of the money voted to maintain the HKNVF<sup>571</sup>.

The Admiralty, keen to relieve its financial burdens as well as manpower ones, sought to offset their expenses further by having the colonial government cover the costs of one of their new Motor Torpedo Boats (MTBs) to be stationed in Hong Kong, and would be manned entirely by members of the HKNVF who up to that point had received limited seagoing time due to possessing a lack of suitable vessels of their own. It was considered that 'the use of one of these M.T.Bs. by the R.N.V.R. would be of great value from training the force in the local waters of the Colony and its possession would be an undoubted encouragement to the morale and prestige of the force', with knock-on benefits for recruitment. For the Admiralty's part, 'on the manning side, we should gain in a branch in which the shortage is most acute'. Though disadvantages were perceived as being 'a possible slight reduction in the efficiency of the M.T.B. flotilla for local defence purposes... it is thought that this would be offset by the gain in the local knowledge and keenness of the R.N.V.R. personnel'<sup>572</sup>.

This desired expansion of the force, however, presented a constitutional problem for the HKNVF, with the Admiralty's plans for the force diverging from the role envisaged by the Hong Kong Government. The initial Ordinance under the 1931

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<sup>571</sup> TNA, ADM 116/4343, 'Appendix to letter of 21<sup>st</sup> December, 1938 from Commanding Office, Hong Kong Naval Volunteer Force to commodore, Hong Kong', p.1.

<sup>572</sup> TNA, ADM 116/4343, M.03144/37, Director of Plans, 1 July 1937.

Colonial Naval Defence Act allowed for the Governor to 'raise and maintain a force of volunteers for the naval defence of the Colony within its territorial waters'<sup>573</sup>. It did not, however, allow such a force to 'maintain and use vessels of war'<sup>574</sup>. This would include the MTB, which even if 'if its maintenance by the Colony were possible, would [consequently] be confined to the territorial waters of Hong Kong'. For the force to be able to operate the vessel, a second Ordinance would have to be created which place the HKNVF at 'His Majesty's disposal for general service for the Royal Navy any such war vessel and any officers and men of the local Naval Volunteer Force as have been entered on terms accepting such service'<sup>575</sup>. This was what the Admiralty had always wanted, to give them ultimate operational jurisdiction over the force, but they encountered a stumbling block in the form of the local Defence Committee in Hong Kong, which considered that 'it would be undesirable and contrary to the best interests of the Colony to proceed with the Second Ordinance'. Again, the Army and General Barret were seen as among the main dissidents, 'influenced by the consideration that the military volunteers in Hong Kong are below strength, partly on account of the business depression in China which has cut down the European staffs employed by the big firms'<sup>576</sup>.

Despite these difficulties, it was remarked by the Commodore that 'great progress has been made by the Chinese ratings, who are now able to form an efficient minesweeping personnel'. These ratings were specifically recruited from maritime backgrounds, in particular 'Chinese boat "Boys", sampan owners and launch hands'. That basic 'sea sense inherent in them' was then 'developed by

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<sup>573</sup> TNA, CO 129/555/9, Item 4, 30 November 1935.

<sup>574</sup> TNA, ADM 116/4343, Head of Naval Branch, 16 July 1937.

<sup>575</sup> TNA, CO 129/555/9, Item 4, 30 November 1935.

<sup>576</sup> *Idem*.

training in western equipment and routine, gunnery, signals, etc.<sup>577</sup> Consequently, under British tutelage they were said to have gained a 'fair' general knowledge of seamanship, and 'their bearing at the various parades which they attended showed them to be keen and smart'. The 'credit for this progress is entirely due to the unflinching patience and tact' of their Royal Navy instructors<sup>578</sup> so the report concluded, in the process placing naval training of the local force within a longer tradition of paternalism which underpinned British imperialism. Despite such development discourse, 'very serious objections' were raised at the potential liability for Europeans to serve outside the Colony, and concerns over local security reflected deeper prejudices which resided regarding the Chinese population and their reliability during wartime:

The European man-power of the Colony is strictly limited and in a serious emergency every available European will be required to man the defences and essential services. If at such a time an important part of this man-power were to be called elsewhere as members of the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve... the sudden withdrawal of only a few officers or Cadets would disorganise the whole Hong Kong Naval Volunteer Force, very grave concern would be caused to those responsible for the Colony's defence.<sup>579</sup>

On 25 March 1936, the limited number of European volunteers prompted the Governor of Hong Kong to officially extend 'an invitation to volunteer service', stating

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<sup>577</sup> TNA, ADM 116/4343, 'Annual Report - 1<sup>st</sup> April 1936 to 31<sup>st</sup> March, 1937', From Commanding Officer, HKNVR, to Commodore, Hong Kong, 2 April 1937.

<sup>578</sup> TNA, CO 129/557/7, Item 50, From Commodore, Hong Kong, to the Governor, Hong Kong, 17 April 1936.

<sup>579</sup> TNA, CO 129/555/9, 'Letter from Officer Administering the Government to the Right Honourable Malcolm Macdonald, M.P.' 28 August 1935, pp.2-3.

it to be 'the duty of every able-bodied British-born man of suitable age to undergo training which will qualify him to take part in the most effective manner possible in the in the defence of the Colony'<sup>580</sup>. The status of permanent seamen ratings was increased from Class II to Class I with a rise of \$2 in salary per month, in the hope of securing 'a better type' of permanent European rating 'to be an example to the Chinese Volunteers.'<sup>581</sup> Yet response to such measures was slow, and to bolster their ranks, conditions for entry to the HKRNVR were not always rigorously enforced.

The Wavy Navy was not so bad and not so hot... I was very lazy as regards signalling... I only passed through my signalling test owing to the fact that several of us were taken at the same time and I was able to listen to the others calling out the dots and dashes for my benefit.<sup>582</sup>

As in Trinidad and the Cayman Islands, the local Scouting organisation was seen to offer a potential alternative source for signalmen<sup>583</sup>. The 'crisis' of September 1938, when the Sino-Japanese war spilled over into Hong Kong's territorial waters where Japanese warships attacked Chinese junks, brought home 'the importance to the Colony of the Hong Kong Naval Volunteer Reserve and its value to the Navy'<sup>584</sup>. This 'period of strained relations when expansion and preparation is necessary' raised 'certain questions regarding the status, pay, victualling and storing of the crews of small auxiliary vessels which carry out duties in regard to the Defence of Hong Kong'. The Japanese action raised the very real prospect of combat, and challenged the

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<sup>580</sup> TNA, CO 129/557/7, W.T. Southern, Colonial Secretary, 12 March 1936.

<sup>581</sup> PROHK, HKRS 7-1-1716, from Commodore, Hong Kong to CO, HKNVF, 'Annual Estimates 1938', 12 August 1937.

<sup>582</sup> PROHK, HKRS 6-1-1706, 'With the MTB's - Escape from Hong Kong. December 1941: excerpts from a letter of a Sub-Lieutenant of the HKRNVR to his brother'.

<sup>583</sup> PROHK, HKRS 7-1-1716, 'To the Commanding Officer Hong Kong Naval Volunteer Force from Hong Kong Naval Volunteer Force Communications Branch', 30 March 1938.

<sup>584</sup> TNA, ADM 116/4343, 'Hong Kong Naval Volunteer Force – Annual Report for Year Ended 31<sup>st</sup> March, 1939 (Commodore, Hong Kong No.172.C/39 of 13<sup>th</sup> April, 1939)'.

organisational restrictions which had been imposed on the force on social, political and economic grounds. Additional auxiliary craft for intensified operations could be acquired on dormant contracts or requisitioned by the Admiralty. Yet, 'as no European crews are available it is necessary to enlist in many cases the Chinese crews who usually man them'. Prejudices regarding their potential allegiance again influenced these concerns, with the pessimistic conclusion that 'as no conscription law exists they will have to be persuaded to serve voluntarily'. Furthermore, additional European officers would have to be found for any 'Asiatic crews' who could be so persuaded. It was therefore suggested that combatant status could be granted to 'Tug Masters and Commanding Officers of Police launches' as a solution to this potential shortfall. The other impediment was financial, but any additional colonial expenditure could be redressed by agreeing to place the force at His Majesty's disposal, thus passing responsibility for pay and victualling to the Royal Navy for those members of the force who volunteered for general service.<sup>585</sup> At the same time, Japan's unabated expansion into China and the escalating situation in Europe, decreased the likelihood that Britain would be able to successfully defend Hong Kong in the event of war. In late 1937, a revised War Memorandum (Eastern) now advised that should such an eventuality occur, Hong Kong could not be held and would have to be evacuated due to its vulnerability to Japanese air attack which also ruled out its use as an advanced base for the fleet<sup>586</sup>.

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<sup>585</sup> TNA, ADM 1/9833, 'Hong Kong Naval Volunteer Force', From The Commander-in-Chief, China Station, to The Secretary of the Admiralty, 7 February 1939.

<sup>586</sup> Ian Cowman, *Dominion or Decline: Anglo-American Naval Relations on the Pacific, 1937-1941* (Oxford, 1996), pp.21-22.

Under this pressure, on 1 August 1939, after almost four years of discussion, Ordinance No.25 finally came into operation<sup>587</sup>, allowing the local naval force to legally man vessels of war outside of its territorial waters, and giving 'authority to the Navy to use the force at any parts requiring assistance, especially Singapore, should the occasion arise<sup>588</sup>. Thus, local defence priorities became superseded by imperial ones, with the surviving men and vessels of the HKRNVR now able to be redeployed and continue fighting should Hong Kong have to be abandoned as anticipated. In relation, its members were asked if they were prepared to volunteer for general service in emergency; of the European Officers of the Executive and Non-Executive Branches, sixty eight from seventy seven accepted - 88%, as well as 'a very high percentage of the Minewatching Branch and considerable numbers of Asiatics'<sup>589</sup>. These were thus constituted into the formal Hong Kong Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve (HKRNVR), though the HKNVF technically remained in effect alongside it for those few men unwilling to volunteer for general service. By 1941, 90% of the local naval force had accepted the obligation<sup>590</sup>. Though RNVR officers would not normally have been eligible for Royal Navy commissions, 'owing to the needs of projected naval expansion', this impediment was removed for Hong Kong<sup>591</sup>. To offset local concerns regarding an absence of European manpower, the formation of

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<sup>587</sup> TNA, CO 129/584/8, Item 24, 'Hong Kong Royal Naval Reserve and Hong Kong Naval Volunteer Force - Annual Report: 1<sup>st</sup> April, 1939 to 31<sup>st</sup> March, 1940', p.1.

<sup>588</sup> *South China Morning Post*, 3 June 1937, p.2.

<sup>589</sup> TNA, CO 129/584/8, Item 24, 'Hong Kong Royal Naval Reserve and Hong Kong Naval Volunteer Force - Annual Report: 1<sup>st</sup> April, 1939 to 31<sup>st</sup> March, 1940', p.2.

<sup>590</sup> TNA, CO 825/32/3, Item 29, 'Statutory Declaration' declared by Commander James Petrie at Mint, Building, Sydney, 1942.

<sup>591</sup> *South China Morning Post*, 5 June 1937. The offer of Royal Navy commissions had previously been reserved solely for Royal Naval Reserve (RNR) officers, that branch being made up of Professional merchant seamen, whereas the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve (RNVR) consisted of amateur seamen with a minimum of practical sea experience. The RNR and RNVR were amalgamated in 1958.



an additional 'European Seamen Branch' was authorised 'primarily for the defence of the Colony'<sup>592</sup>.

## **Mobilisation for War**

The outbreak of war with Germany, followed by the occupation of the border region of the New Territories by Japanese troops, increased local tensions and led to the partial mobilization of the HKRNVR. This was 'partly as a measure of general preparedness and to ensure a better surveillance of the waters surrounding the Colony; and partly to assist in the control of British merchant ships'<sup>593</sup>. The first members were mobilized for full-time service on 30<sup>th</sup> August 1939, with subsequent batches following on 4 September and 26 October that year, making the HKRNVR the first Naval Volunteer Unit within the British Empire to be mobilized and sent to sea, before the outbreak of the war, and with its own officers in command of some of the craft of the auxiliary flotilla<sup>594</sup>. Within the first week of mobilization, HKRNVR officers had taken command of all the ships of the flotilla, and had to overcome a number of difficulties due to 'the heterogeneous collection of craft' they were largely unfamiliar with:

To the sea-going members the first few weeks were occupied by officers in getting to know ships. It was not a case of getting to know their own

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<sup>592</sup> TNA, CO 129/584/8, Item 24, 'Hong Kong Royal Naval Reserve and Hong Kong Naval Volunteer Force - Annual Report: 1<sup>st</sup> April, 1939 to 31<sup>st</sup> March, 1940', p.2.

<sup>593</sup> TNA, CO 129/584/8, Item 32, From Commodore A.M. Peters to the Governor, 11 April 1940, p.1.

<sup>594</sup> TNA, CO 129/584/8, Item 30, Commander Petrie, H.K.R.N.V.R. Commanding Officer, 8 September 1939, A.S.R.9, p.1.

ship because there was not any – they were given a different ship almost everyday until they knew them all.<sup>595</sup>

The age and condition of the equipment bequeathed to them caused 'disorganisation due to failure of some, in fact most, of the old A.P.V's [Auxiliary Patrol Vessels] to stand up to unaccustomed heavy duty'. Not initially designed for continuous naval patrols, there were also no cooking facilities on the ships, and they had to make do with improvised living quarters. The lack of sea-going experience acquired by the force during peacetime also caused issues, and for some 'the acquiring of "sea legs" was a painful process'<sup>596</sup>. In particular, the Communication Branch Ratings 'did not take kindly to routine and discipline, suffered from sea-sickness and were pretty miserable and difficult.'<sup>597</sup> Despite these challenges, overall 'the adjustment to some semblance of order and routine was hard work but it was accomplished with remarkable harmony and good temper'<sup>598</sup>. Though it would be two years before the conflict spread to the East, the growing need of the war in Europe necessitated the withdrawal of increasing numbers of Royal Navy personnel from Hong Kong, with consequently additional devolving to the HKRNVR<sup>599</sup>. Thus, the force successfully filled the role envisaged by the Admiralty when the 1931 Colonial Defence Act was conceived, despite attracting scepticism in some circles:

Although the past seven months have not seen the tide of war approach near the Colony, so that in ill-informed quarters the work of the Hong Kong Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve may be considered of little value,

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<sup>595</sup> TNA, CO 129/588/15, Item 9, Hong Kong Naval Volunteer Reserve – A.S.R. 71/40 (Auxiliary Services Routine), 30 August 1940, p.1.

<sup>596</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>597</sup> TNA, CO 129/584/8, Item 26, 'Hong Kong Royal Naval Reserve and Hong Kong Naval Volunteer Force - Annual Report: 1<sup>st</sup> April, 1939 to 31<sup>st</sup> March, 1940', p.3.

<sup>598</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>599</sup> PROHK, HKRS 6-1-1706, From Ralph Smith to B.J.B. Morahan, 14 April 1950, p.3.

yet it has contributed directly and in no small measure to the Imperial War effort in two important factors, firstly, by adding to the security of the Fortress of Hong Kong, and, secondly, by relieving Active Service officers and men, in order that they may proceed to the United Kingdom for service in the Fleet in home waters.<sup>600</sup>

This fed into a wider discourse whereby 'military spokesmen propagated the dogma (first heard, and distrusted, by Rudyard Kipling on a visit to the colony in 1889) that Hong Kong was an "impregnable fortress"<sup>601</sup>, though due to the restrictions of the Washington Treaty such bravado remained a myth rather than a reality.

The HKRNVR's response and conduct during the early days of the war earned it plaudits from the colony's Governor:

I wish in the first place to acknowledge both the ready alacrity with which those who were called up turned out and the high sense of public spirit of many of their employers who were seriously embarrassed by the sudden depletion of their staffs.<sup>602</sup>

This 'high sense of public spirit' prompted the influential Eurasian businessman Sir Robert Ho Tung on 17 August 1940 to loan the HKRNVR the river steamer *Tai Hing* for the duration of the war as a replacement for the decrepit *Cornflower*. She was likewise renamed on 7 September 1940 after the Admiralty authorised the Commodore's proposal 'to retain the name HMS *Cornflower* in perpetuity for use of

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<sup>600</sup> TNA, CO 129/584/8, Item 32, From Commodore A.M. Peters to the Governor, 11 April 1940, p.1.

<sup>601</sup> Snow, *The Fall of Hong Kong*, p.47.

<sup>602</sup> TNA, CO 129/584/8, Item 30, Commander Petrie, H.K.R.N.V.R. Commanding Officer, 8 September 1939, A.S.R.9, p.1.

the HKRNVR Headquarters whether afloat or ashore<sup>603</sup>, strengthening the force's identity, esprit de corps and pride in the service, and tightening the bond fostered by Elliot between the Hong Kong public and the Navy. It also created a tradition, and demonstrated that though the force may have been raised in response to the short-term threat of Japan, growing under the pressures of war, it was seen to have a longer-term role to play after the current conflict had ended, not just in local thinking, but also in the 'official mind' of the Admiralty back in the metropole. The pressures of war had seemingly produced a positive effect on Hong Kong, strengthening its sense of duty both socially and imperially, so it was argued in *The Times*:

The backwash of war has made changes in the life and habits of Hong-kong... Local-born British subjects, a "minority" of growing importance in Hong-kong, are becoming more articulate for their rights... the social conscience is being awakened so that it is no longer left to the zealous few to tackle the social evils of the place... the general attitude of 20 years ago, "I am not here for my health," had given way to a stronger sense of civic duty. People who could not, at one time, see beyond the Kowloon hills, now have a broader concept of Hong-kong's position in relation to China, the Empire, and the changing world in which we live.<sup>604</sup>

This article was written at a distance from the colony, however, and for a besieged British public who were now cut off from Europe in the struggle against Germany, stories and propaganda about the Empire and its war contribution helped to boost morale at home by instilling the sense that Britain was not alone after all. Framed in

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<sup>603</sup> TNA, CO 129/588/15, Item 8, 'Annual report by the Commanding Officer, 1<sup>st</sup> April 1940 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 1941, p.2.

<sup>604</sup> *The Times*, 7 July 1941, p.5.

the context of fascist authoritarianism, the fact that within the British Empire 'freedom' was flourishing, producing positive social and moral benefits reinforced both Britain's *raison d'être* for the war, and her imperial role itself. Yet, this sense of colonial unity was superficial, as the local-born British 'minority' were here politicised as a group in reaction to the increased influx of Chinese refugees from across the border. Rather than the colony coming closer together as a whole, ethnic divisions were actually being brought into sharper focus.

Even within the European community, the public face of harmonious solidarity between civil and naval/military interests was cracking. The Governor had 'entrusted' Commander Petrie to prepare a mobilization roster, 'to nominate if possible only those whose mobilization would cause least inconvenience to the civil community'. He was expected to make 'a private assessment of their value in the civil community in relation to my need for their services'. Petrie came to overriding conclusion that 'my need for Senior Officers, however, out-weighed other considerations'<sup>605</sup>. On 15 September, after two mobilizations had been effected, concerns were already being aired that subordinated 'civilian employers might oppose further mobilization of members of their staff'. This was based on the fact that 'during the summer months foreign firms have members of their staffs on Home Leave'<sup>606</sup>. It was not found practicable to mobilise any of the European seamen ratings, as the pay provided could not match their civilian wages and would be 'inadequate to support their families', and they had to remain 'in reserve against an emergency when the entire

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<sup>605</sup> TNA, CO 129/584/8, Item 26, 'Hong Kong Royal Naval Reserve and Hong Kong Naval Volunteer Force - Annual Report: 1<sup>st</sup> April, 1939 to 31<sup>st</sup> March, 1940', p.3.

<sup>606</sup> TNA, CO 129/584/8, Item 27, 'Hong Kong Royal Naval Reserve and Hong Kong Naval Volunteer Force - Annual Report: 1<sup>st</sup> April, 1939 to 31<sup>st</sup> March, 1940', p.4.

man-power of the Colony might be mobilized'<sup>607</sup>. Paradoxically, the fact that Hong Kong was detached from the main theatre of conflict and therefore continued with a policy of 'business as usual', while at the same time preparing for the worst, stretched the colony's resources even more than if 'total war' had been declared with full mobilization of the war economy that that entailed:

There was shortage of mobilized officer personnel due to the main effect of the war not having reached Hong Kong. A balance between local sea defence requirements and the needs of employers to retain their staff had to be found. The Admiralty needed the men but the Home Government stated that trade must be maintained – result, the formation of a local Reference Board to assess the claims of both parties.<sup>608</sup>

By 16 May 1940, the strains on European manpower in all facets of Hong Kong society meant that Petrie had to begin searching outside the Colony for additional full-time naval officers:

He was told that the war-made demands upon the Civil Service were such that I could hold out no hope of more members of the Service who hold commission in the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve or Naval Volunteer Force being available for mobilization - fourteen were mobilized in the early months of the war and eleven are still on regular duty - nor did it appear from what he said that the prospects of getting many more from the non-official community were at all bright: on the

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<sup>607</sup> TNA, CO 129/584/8, Item 29, 'Hong Kong Royal Naval Reserve and Hong Kong Naval Volunteer Force - Annual Report: 1<sup>st</sup> April, 1939 to 31<sup>st</sup> March, 1940', p.6.

<sup>608</sup> TNA, CO 129/588/15, Item 9, Hong Kong Naval Volunteer Reserve – A.S.R. 71/40 (Auxiliary Services Routine), 30 August 1940, p.1.

other hand occasional casualties are bound to occur among his present personnel. In these circumstances I advised him to discuss with the Commodore the feasibility of getting, say, a dozen sea-faring men of the officer class from Shanghai.<sup>609</sup>

Yet, attracting them to Hong Kong was another matter and was done so by feeding misinformation regarding the extent of the HKRNVR's wartime importance and role, causing a degree of discontent and exacerbating traditional inter-colonial rivalries which undermined service unity and esprit de corps:

The 1940 recruitment and intake of our "Shanghai contingent". Excellent chaps, nearly all of them, but they were persuaded in Shanghai to volunteer into the Hong Kong RNVR on what was at best a misunderstanding – and was viewed by some of them (eager for active service) as downright deception. That, and the not uncommon pre-war Shanghai-Hong Kong rivalry, tended to make them a rather indigestible intake at least at the start!<sup>610</sup>

Unable to spare any personnel under such conditions, members of the HKRNVR had to forgo their regular 'Home Leave' back to Britain, 'a hurdle which we cannot expect to clear until after the war', and in addition their local duties had become 'so arduous that local leave has been almost impossible'<sup>611</sup>. The restrictions imposed by the colonial authorities frustrated the aspirations of the British members of the HKRNVR, who felt divorced from their 'home' and the war being waged. The

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<sup>609</sup> TNA, CO 129/584/8, Items 21-22, From the Governor to the Right Honourable Lord Lloyd of Dolobran, 16 May 1940, pp.1-2.

<sup>610</sup> PROHK, HKRS 6-1-1706, J.C. McDouall to A. Sommerfelt, 5 April 1961, p.2.

<sup>611</sup> TNA, CO 129/588/15, Item 10, Hong Kong Naval Volunteer Reserve – A.S.R. 71/40 (Auxiliary Services Routine), 30 August 1940, p.2.

fact that they freed up regular Royal Navy personnel for deployment to more active theatres was little comfort for their own desires for action and feelings they were making a difference. The fact that they continued to identify 'home' as being Britain and not Hong Kong, which was merely seen as their temporary domicile, meant that they subordinated the local needs of the colony to those of the imperial motherland. Again, an appeal to Empire unity was utilised to combat this sense of disconnectedness and 'restlessness':

We are impatient to be "in it" at home. Our unmobilized men want to be mobilized. All over the Empire unmobilized men want to be mobilized; mobilized men want active engagement with the enemy. This World War is today being actively fought by the privileged few... It is also being fought less spectacularly but no less decisively by others of whom we are part... We have volunteered for General Service. The Admiralty knows it and will call upon us for service elsewhere when we are required. We are doing our job for the Empire and we are doing it well. It is the Empire which is at war.<sup>612</sup>

In contrast, 'to the Seamen Ratings the first few weeks seemed as sublimely uneventful as life in general seems to the mass of Chinese'.<sup>613</sup> They did not possess the same personal attachment to Britain, or shared concerns about her fortunes in the European war, and several of the unmobilized Chinese members of the force were struck off for not attending drills<sup>614</sup>. This was despite moves to provide Chinese

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<sup>612</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.2-3.

<sup>613</sup> TNA, CO 129/588/15, Item 9, Hong Kong Naval Volunteer Reserve – A.S.R. 71/40 (Auxiliary Services Routine), 30 August 1940, p.1.

<sup>614</sup> TNA, CO 129/588/15, Item 7, 'Annual report by the Commanding Officer, 1<sup>st</sup> April 1940 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 1941, p.1.



ratings with a free meal on Tuesdays and Fridays at 1630 before training, for 'many of the Volunteers are either very poorly paid or unemployed', and 'a Rating travelling several miles to attend a Drill is poorly recompensed by 15 cents and that to provide a meal, in addition to the bounty, would ensure a larger attendance of men fit to undergo instruction'<sup>615</sup>. One tactic to combat apathy was to institute a series of short broadcasts on naval subjects of general interest 'in order to provide efficient propaganda on Naval matters'<sup>616</sup>. Such absentees did not prevent the formation of an additional Engineering branch for Chinese<sup>617</sup>, partly for absence of alternatives, though it was a role for which they were deemed particularly suited by the Navy, as mirrored by similar moves later on in Singapore.

Though the existing European members of the HKRNVR wanted to fight, this sense of patriotic duty did not reflect the attitudes of the wider civilian community. Hong Kong had been the first Crown Colony to implement compulsory service, forming a tribunal on Monday 28 August 1939 to press civilian men into the military and emergency corps. This caused a backlash from different sections of society. A number of men called before the tribunal protested against compulsory service on work grounds and other conflicting time commitments. Such excuses were not viewed with sympathy from some quarters. A '(Mrs) M.' wrote to the *South China Morning Post*, 'disgusted with some of the men in Hong Kong for the silly excuses some put forward to exempt them from military service':

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<sup>615</sup> PROHK, HKRS 7-1-1716, From Commodore, Hong Kong to CO, HKNVF, 'Annual Estimates 1938', 12 August 1937.

<sup>616</sup> PROHK, HKRS 7-1-1771(1), Publicity on Naval Matters - Broadcasts, 19 April 1940.

<sup>617</sup> PROHK, HKRS 7-1-1716, From Commodore, Hong Kong to CO, HKNVF, 'Annual Estimates 1938', 12 August 1937.

Quite a lot of people seem to think that their jobs are very important, but don't they understand that they would all be at a standstill in the case of an emergency?... Thank Heaven we have the Regular Army and Navy. I suppose some of these "busy men" in Hong Kong think that the Services can guard the Colony so that they can keep their jobs in comfort.<sup>618</sup>

In response, 'BUSINESSMAN' argued that:

The members of the fighting forces are so by choice, having taken to the Navy or Army as a profession and as such, during the last twenty odd years, have a very pleasant time, short working hours and plenty of games... As far as the male civilian population of this Colony is concerned, I have little doubt that in the event of an emergency they will do their bit... a number were involved in the last war and experience has taught them not to allow themselves to fall into the grip of officialdom until absolutely necessary.<sup>619</sup>

It appears that those 'bonds of friendship' and understanding which Commodore Elliot had worked so hard to foster between the Navy and the Hong Kong public, quickly began to unravel when it came to the crunch, and the latter were called upon to step up and share the former's burden. The local perception that the war in Europe did not constitute an emergency in Hong Kong, and thus did not warrant their active involvement, was further emphasised by 'NOT YET A VOLUNTEER', who

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<sup>618</sup> *South China Morning Post*, 1 September 1939, p.8.

<sup>619</sup> *Ibid.*, 2 August 1939, p.8.

stated that 'if and when the war does come I do not think that it will require "Compulsory Service" to make most Englishmen do their bit'<sup>620</sup>.

### Chinese 'transient' loyalty

War and disagreements around compulsory service not only sparked divisions between civil society and the services, men and women, but also along ethnic lines, emphasised by the comment regarding 'most Englishmen', and the loyalty of the local Chinese population was particularly called into question:

While any decent foreigner (our opponents excepted of course) will fight for or help willingly the country which gave him hospitality, nearly all Chinese seem either not to mind a bit or are ready to rush elsewhere, for safety. The native population is composed of what? Eighty per cent of coolies, shop *fokis* and the like; hardly with a brain and of course without any sense of country; they are hardly over the animal class and must be treated as such. Those remaining (real Hong Kong Chinese apart) are composed of taipans, retired officials or generals, traders, and tens of thousands of little sneaks who ran away from their country to escape their military duties. The whole lot (or nearly) is full of corruption, ready to sell anything to anyone or acclaim any flag for a few dollars.<sup>621</sup>

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<sup>620</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>621</sup> *Ibid.*, 1 September 1939, p.8.

Though this perception of Mr 'Gallus' was no doubt an extreme one, loaded with racial prejudice and stereotypes, it does reflect some of the identity problems associated with Hong Kong's nature as an entrepôt. This status had naturally encouraged a transient trading community to develop in the colony, bearing a cosmopolitan commercial outlook. Chinese businessmen followed the opportunities that Hong Kong presented, but generally did not settle there, instead returning to their 'homelands' and the families they'd left behind with money made from their transnational ventures:

...few, if any, having been born at the place. The majority of these men are engaged in trade, and only reside in Hong-Kong long enough to obtain a competency with which they may return to their native land. The facilities of transit now afforded by the various lines of steamers render a trip home so inexpensive and expeditious, that those who can afford it frequently avail themselves of a run to the old country.<sup>622</sup>

Out of a population of 849,800 in 1931, less than a third, 276,400, were born in Hong Kong.<sup>623</sup> The very ideology of free trade capitalism cut across national borders and allegiances, yet what strengthened the colony during peacetime with the wealth that it cultivated, potentially compromised Hong Kong at war, with such transiency causing the British to question the loyalty and willingness of these economic migrants to defend the colony which did not constitute their 'home':

From the point of view of defence it would be no exaggeration to say that all Chinamen in Hong Kong would be open to suspicion of anti-British

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<sup>622</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>623</sup> Fan Shu Ching, *The Population of Hong Kong* (Hong Kong, 1974), pp.18-19.

intentions should they be present in a siege of Hong Kong as part of a beleaguered populace. We feel that their reactions would immediately turn to the side which appeared likely to be the probable winner. The world situation and other such things we feel are unlikely to influence the transient loyalty of a Chinaman.<sup>624</sup>

Yet, by encouraging a laissez-faire outlook in Hong Kong, the British were themselves the architects in fostering there this all-encompassing, and morally-eroding, commerciality:

The Colony is just a big godown, armed to the teeth, in the Far East. Its soil is not productive by nature and therefore cannot support an agricultural population worth mentioning. It has to depend on trade and handicraft manufactures. Napoleon has said - "Commerce dries up the soul; the merchant has neither faith nor country". Chinese are just humans and if what Bonaparte said applies well to his people and their neighbours; it cannot be surprising some Chinese merchants have degraded.<sup>625</sup>

This perception is much more sympathetic towards the Chinese than that of Mr 'Gallus', recognising them as 'just humans' as opposed to 'hardly over the animal class'. More significantly, however, here the Chinese are depicted as moral victims of the influx of Western capitalism. More often, colonial discourse positioned benighted Oriental immorality and decay as the 'other' to enlightened British imperialism and progress. China was recognised as having once been a civilised country, but had fallen into a state of stagnancy as a consequence of its long self-imposed isolation

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<sup>624</sup> TNA, FO 371/27622, Letter from Lieutenant-Colonel F.C. Scott of the War Office to Gent of the Colonial Office, 22 August 1941, p.185.

<sup>625</sup> Ibid., 2 September 1939, p.8.

from the West. The 'civilising mission' in the Chinese context was thus about resurrecting Chinese civilisation along 'modern' Western models, rather than building it up from scratch, though both emphasised a paternal-dependent relationship. Within this dynamic, there resided a fear that the 'teacher' could become corrupted by the moral decay which thus was associated with both the cultural and geographical climate of the Orient. In the previous example, however, rather than being the antidote, the degrading force is portrayed as the West and its 'civilising' values.

This was a minority view, however, and the extreme attitudes of those such as Mr 'Gallus', built on top of the more conservative views regarding Hong Kong's inherent transient commerciality, prompted an angry response from the Chinese community, exacerbating internal divisions and reinforcing stereotypes on the eve of the Second World War:

It is always good to know what others think of us. Besides, I had always wondered why we who are living here are so apathetic and indifferent to its safety. Now I know. If Gallus' outburst be representative of the general European sentiments towards their fellow Chinese residents, thinking that 80% of us are "hardly with a brain and of course without any sense of country" and "are hardly over the animal class" then what more could they expect from us?

Preconceptions regarding Chinese unreliability were reinforced by wide scale desertions from the HKRNVR following the Japanese invasion of Hong Kong on 8 December 1941. By failing to keep the non-European population informed about the war situation, the colonial authorities effectively confirmed Chinese assumptions 'that

the war was a British affair that had nothing to do with them... Faced with this crisis, their instinct was to run<sup>626</sup>. The HKRNVR practice of mooring vessels in lots of two down Aberdeen Harbour seemed 'disturbingly idiotic to Chinese after [the] first bombing<sup>627</sup>; when HMS *Indira* was sunk by such 'morale-shaking bombing', all the crew of the adjacent HMS *Perla* 'bolted'. Panic usually spread from the engine room ratings, who were trapped within the bowels of the ship, unable to see what was going on outside.<sup>628</sup> Aboard HMS *Minnie* on 11 December, two men were unconscious from fear, mess boys and engine room ratings rioted, the crew refused to go to sea again, and every time Aberdeen was raided and the dockyard police disappeared into the shelters, the crew would take advantage and run. *Minnie's* Commanding Officer managed to gather replacement crew by 16 December, only for them to arrive at the dockyard gates at noon, just in time to witness a large air-raid; they immediately reversed their decision to join<sup>629</sup>. Though a number of Chinese remained loyal, some British officers retained a suspicion even of these. When the crew of HMS *Frosty* rendezvoused at the Aberdeen Industrial School on 19 December to receive their evacuation orders, the CO was told by the on-duty RN officer, Lt. Commander Harrison: "tell all your Chinese to fuck off, and you to get up into the hills... I'm not standing any truck from a two and a half wavy navy... your messman might be a fifth columnist"<sup>630</sup>. The suspected Chinese messman had fifteen years service in the RN to his name. Upon the British return to Hong Kong after the war, conscious of their more precarious position in reasserting authority there, 'it was agreed that to avoid possible political complications and damage to

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<sup>626</sup> Snow, *The Fall of Hong Kong*, pp.55-6.

<sup>627</sup> PROHK, HKRS 6-1-1706, J.C. McDouall Papers, p.7.

<sup>628</sup> *Ibid.*, p.10.

<sup>629</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>630</sup> *Ibid.*, p.24.

British prestige the trouble must be cleared up' regarding those Chinese ratings illegally discharged by Harrison, and settling questions regarding pay and demobilisation<sup>631</sup>.

The reasons behind the desertions were not the result of any innately unreliable characteristic amongst the Chinese, despite the British harbouring such fears. In fact, many of the conditions which prompted Chinese naval personnel to desert from the force were created by the naval and colonial authorities themselves. There was disenchantment with the round-the-clock work and meagre rations. There had been particular resentment at the fact on 11 December they had been ordered to fire upon fellow Chinese, destroying at least twenty junks and crippling many more suspected of carrying Japanese infiltrators, rumours which proved to be false.<sup>632</sup> At the same time, shore batteries bombarded a fishing village at the head of Picnic Bay. It was later admitted by HKRNVR officer J.C. McDouall, that these actions were taken without seeking formal identification, as 'no officer on any ship concerned or in any shore battery saw any Japanese in the junks, though all but those on *Perla* and *Poseidon* were admittedly too far away to distinguish faces'<sup>633</sup>.

The suddenness of the Japanese attack meant that billeting of HKRNVR families could not be sanctioned in time to move them from the mainland and into safe houses on the island. Fear for their families' safety thus increased amongst the men when the Japanese entered Kowloon and unopposed air raids escalated, exacerbated by 'over-optimistic assurances of families being looked after' which

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<sup>631</sup> PROHK, HKRS 7-1-1716, From CO, HKRNVR, to C-in-C, Hong Kong, 8 September 1945.

<sup>632</sup> Lieutenant-Commander Gandy, HKRNVR, quoted in Snow: *The Fall of Hong Kong*, p.69.

<sup>633</sup> PROHK, HKRS 6-1-1706, J.C. McDouall Papers, p.15.



were 'too often quickly found to be false'<sup>634</sup>. With a lack of opportunities to visit and check on their families, many deserters took matters into their own hands. Those ratings 'without families usually seemed comparatively undisturbed by danger'<sup>635</sup>, ironic considering it were those Chinese without roots in Hong Kong who the British originally believed could not be relied upon in war. A large proportion of the deserters had formerly been merchant sailors enlisted in the HKRNVR on T.124 contracts when their vessels were requisitioned, and therefore 'because they had always been able to leave or be dismissed at one month's notice, their training and discipline had consequently suffered'. They thus should not be considered volunteers in the same sense, and they had not received the same degree of naval training to maintain discipline: 'from the Ratings point of view they were employed and paid as Merchant crews – bombing was not in the contract'<sup>636</sup>.

What is also not fully regarded in British dispersions of Chinese loyalty is that within Chinese culture, military service was considered lesser in status than the merchant-class. Therefore, even though wider volunteering may have led to increased British respect, or at least drawn less criticism, it would have lowered many in the eyes of their fellow Chinese, which was the group opinion that mattered most to them. Ironically, official policy since the nineteenth century had fostered this lack of Chinese sympathy with colonial affairs by preserving communal distinctiveness, leaving the Chinese community to handle their own internal policing, adjudication, social welfare and medical care through an assortment of indigenous institutions. By 1936, Hong Kong's European and Chinese communities were only

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<sup>634</sup> Idem.

<sup>635</sup> Idem.

<sup>636</sup> PROHK, HKRS 6-1-1706, J.C. McDouall Papers, p.10.

'just beginning' to mix on a social basis<sup>637</sup>, and during this decade 'pushing forward within the framework of their own self-contained world the Chinese were starting in various ways to pose a steadily growing challenge to British hegemony<sup>638</sup>.

One such challenge that the Colonial authorities were wary of was the prominent 'communistic element' rooted in the Chinese Seamen's Union<sup>639</sup>. Considering this in relation to the links between the Royal Navy and local capitalist interests, colonial efforts to turn Hong Kong attention seaward and create alternative organisational outlets for the colony's Chinese maritime community to reinforce British hegemony and counteract the influence of subversive groups, can be seen as part of a larger strategy of preserving the imperial status quo.

The coming of war to East Asia brought with it a change in discourse. On 8 December 1941, the Japanese attacked Hong Kong, eight hours after the strike on Pearl Harbour. The following day, the Commander-in-Chief Far East Command, Air Chief Marshall Sir Robert Brooke-Popham, and Commander-in-Chief China Station, Vice Admiral Sir Geoffrey Layton, issued the following statement:

Let us all remember that we here in the Far East form part of the great campaign for the preservation in the world of truth and justice and freedom; confidence, resolution, enterprise and devotion to the cause must and will inspire every one of us in the fighting services, while from the civilian population, we expect that patience, endurance and serenity

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<sup>637</sup> Percy Chen, *China Called Me: My Life inside the Chinese Revolution* (Boston, 1979), p.277, p.17.

<sup>638</sup> Snow, *The Fall of Hong Kong*, pp.4-5.

<sup>639</sup> *Ibid.*, p.30.

which is the great virtue of the East and which will go far to assist the fighting men to gain final and complete victory.<sup>640</sup>

With the colony besieged by Japanese soldiers, it could not afford to face opposition within its own ranks as well as at its gate. The British official response above is interesting not merely because of its increased appeal to trans-ethnic colonial unity in the face of a common enemy, but its attempts at cultural sympathy. The language adopted is layered with subtextual resonance for the Chinese community. 'Serenity' is explicitly mentioned in relation to the 'East'. The notion carries specific religious connotations, being commonly associated with Buddhism, though it also influenced Taoism. Buddhism and Taoism were the major religions in Hong Kong, and the Colony was affected by the Buddhist revival that likewise occurred in South China during the 1920s<sup>641</sup>. One of the Ten Perfections (*dasa pāramiyo*) listed in the *Buddhavamsa* scripture of Theravada Buddhism is serenity, which alongside equanimity, represents '*upekkhā*':

Upekkhā means equanimity in the face of the fluctuations of worldly fortune... it is indifference only to the demands of the ego-self with its craving for pleasure and position, not to the well-being of one's fellow human beings. True equanimity is the pinnacle of the four social attitudes that the Buddhist texts call the 'divine abodes'.<sup>642</sup>

The Second World War can surely be viewed as one of the ultimate 'fluctuations of worldly fortune'. A call for serenity/*upekkhā* upon the invasion of Hong Kong by the

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<sup>640</sup> *South China Morning Post*, 9 December 1941, p.6.

<sup>641</sup> Bernard H. K. Luk, 'Religion in Hong Kong History' in Lee Pui-tak (ed.), *Colonial Hong Kong and Modern China: interaction and reintegration* (Hong Kong, 2005), pp.45-6.

<sup>642</sup> Bhikku Bodhi, 'Toward a Threshold of Understanding', *Access to Insight*, 5 June 2010, [http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/bodhi/bps-essay\\_30.html](http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/bodhi/bps-essay_30.html)

Japanese was an appeal to that higher virtue within the transient Chinese population whom the British had been uncertain about, to put aside their selfish impulses to abandon the Colony, or possibly even aid the Japanese, and act for its greater social good as *upekkhā* dictated. The utilisation of such cultural signifiers thus acted as a mechanism for colonial control, aiding the British in helping preserve social law and order during the crisis. It would also have offset any attempts at garnering popular support through religious solidarity by Buddhist elements of the Japanese army. Beyond serenity, most of the qualities that the Brooke-Popham/Layton statement categorically list carry religious connotations. 'Truth', or 'sacca', is found in Buddha's 'Four Noble Truths', as well as being one of the Ten Perfections. 'Resolution' or '*adhiṭṭhāna*' is another of the Ten Perfections, as are 'patience' and 'endurance', known together as '*khanti*', 'virtue' itself is equated with '*Śīla*', and 'enterprise' is comparable with energy, vigour, and effort which constitute '*virīya*'. Of the Ten Perfections, the Brooke-Popham/Layton statement directly appeals to six.

As the situation deteriorated in Hong Kong in the face of the Japanese onslaught, and with Chinese desertions from the HKRNVR, official moves were made to disperse doubts regarding Britain's ability to continue defending the colony, and maintain the support of the Chinese community:

The public morale is good and Command Headquarters pay tribute to the remarkable imperturbability of the Chinese. This quick adaption to war conditions is necessary and helpful. It is no small achievement to have

settled down in a few days to war routine. Again is demonstrated the Chinese capacity for making the best of things.<sup>643</sup>

Again, the choice of language is interesting here, notably the reference to the Chinese having 'settled down' to a war routine. The fact that this was 'no small achievement' for the general population is again a reference to the traditional presumption regarding its innate transitoriness, and thus the added need to emphasise it and preserve order with the Japanese gaining the upper hand in the battle for Hong Kong. Such assurances were merely a smokescreen, however, and within days of their issuance, calm had given way and preparations were already being made for the inevitable surrender:

The order came through for all ships in the harbour to be scuttled. The Japs had made a sudden break-through and there was a sudden sort of panic. Actually it was another week before we gave in. We only had a quarter of the island left in which to fight.<sup>644</sup>

### **The Escape of 2<sup>nd</sup> MTB**

Despite the desperate situation, and perhaps symptomatic of not being professional Royal Navy officers fully indoctrinated in service discipline, a group of European HKRNVR men deliberately disobeyed this order:

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<sup>643</sup> *South China Morning Post*, 13 December 1941, p.4.

<sup>644</sup> PROHK, HKRS 6-1-1706, 'With the MTB's - Escape from Hong Kong. December 1941: excerpts from a letter of a Sub-Lieutenant of the HKRNVR to his brother'.

We emphatically refused to scuttle. Around us was the most miserable sight that could greet any seaman's eyes; ships in all stages of being sunk, not by enemy action but by our own hands. It was certainly a black morning. We refused to scuttle because among many reasons we were determined never to give up our boats to the Japs but make a break for it at the last moment.<sup>645</sup>

Upon reflection, they considered that their disobedience was 'certainly lucky for the defenders that we hadn't scuttled', as the MTBs, being the only British vessels left afloat with the exception of two gunboats, became invaluable. They were drafted to undertake a variety of tasks they were not designed for, such as 'ferrying troops, stores and ammunition, patrol work, messenger work, evacuating troops off rocky shores at night and anything else that needed to be done'<sup>646</sup>. Word then reached the high authorities of their planned escape:

They were interested in getting away from the island Admiral Chan Chak, China's No.2 Admiral, some of his staff and some higher British Officers and decided to combine the two parties. Three or Four days before the end we were under official orders to get away at the last moment at all costs after picking up the official party. We were selfishly pleased. It was a chance. It was obvious that the island could not hold out very much longer.<sup>647</sup>

Needless to say, the HKRNVR officers chose to follow these particular orders, it being in their better interests, though regret was expressed at having to hide the fact

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<sup>645</sup> Idem.

<sup>646</sup> Idem.

<sup>647</sup> Idem.

away from comrades, and 'leave behind so many of one's pals and slip off in the night as if we were running away at the last moment, even though we realised that that was not the case'<sup>648</sup>. In regards to this last sentiment, however, that had been their original intention, before the plan to evacuate the Admiral was imposed on them by the authorities, thus providing them with a moral absolution that retrospectively altered their perception of the incident and their motives. Consequently, collective empathy relating character and the notion of the 'heroic last stand' with the battle for Hong Kong was preserved, emphasised by the resolute understanding that Hong Kong 'could not be held but must be defended'<sup>649</sup>.

When I think of what happened in Malaya and at Singapore I am filled with pride at the thought of the really marvellous show which had been put up by the island's defenders. At the end, after about ten days of non-stop fighting against heavy odds, with hardly any sleep, food or rest and with no reserves at all, they were outnumbered about five to one, but they didn't give in until the Japs had taken about three quarters of the island.<sup>650</sup>

Here, it is not so much a collective or Empire-transcendent British character which is being lauded. Instead, Hong Kong heroism is being defined not merely in relation to the Japanese aggressors, but also the seeming capitulation of their colonial 'brethren' in Singapore and Malaya. This sense of distinction was further emphasised by the clear priority given to Singapore by the Admiralty, both in pre-war planning and in April 1941, when the Commander-in-Chief, Singapore, transferred a number

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<sup>648</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>649</sup> Sir Selwyn Selwyn-Clarke, *Footprints: The Memoirs of Sir Selwyn Selwyn-Clarke* (Hong Kong, 1975), p.58.

<sup>650</sup> PROHK, HKRS 6-1-1706, 'With the MTB's - Escape from Hong Kong. December 1941: excerpts from a letter of a Sub-Lieutenant of the HKRNVR to his brother'.

of inferior Chinese Bren guns to naval vessels based in Hong Kong, in exchange for their superior Lewis Guns which were then dispatched to Singapore<sup>651</sup>. Furthermore, 'the RNVR had been issued with dud Bren gun ammunition that cost us dearly enough'<sup>652</sup> when put into action against the Japanese later that year, as displayed in the sample of failure rates below:

**Table 5. Sample of HKRNVR vessels and dud ammunition fired during hostilities, 8-19 December, 1941**

HKRNVR Vessel	Percentage of duds
<i>Cornflower</i>	At least 50%
<i>Minnie</i>	30%
<i>Shun Wo</i>	10%
<i>Perla</i>	At least 60%

Source: J.C. McDouall to A. Sommerfelt, 5 April 1961, p. 1, HKRS 6-1-1706, PROHK.

Vessels also had to operate under-strength because of the personnel transfers, such as the Insect-class gunboats *Moth* and *Cicala*, who did not have enough crew to operate all their guns, leaving an undesirable situation where they would man only 'those which are more urgent at the moment':

If "MOTH" or "CICALA" or both are supporting the left flank of Army at any time on mainland and are attacked by aircraft whilst bombarding with their 6" armament, I consider that they should temporarily cease fire with

<sup>651</sup> PROHK, HKRS 6-1-1706, J.C. McDouall Papers, p.38.

<sup>652</sup> PROHK, HKRS 6-1-1706, J.C. McDouall to A. Sommerfelt, 5 April 1961, p.1.



A or B Gun and with the 8 men thus released man their pom-pom and 3" until the attack is driven off.<sup>653</sup>

The feelings of one of the aforementioned 'pals' left behind, Ralph Goodwin, were more mixed, having been laid-up in hospital when he heard 'a muffled throbbing roar' from the engines of the surviving MTBs 'tuning up for their last run':

The sound of those motors warming up on Christmas night, 1942, is still with me whenever my thoughts drift back, just as I heard it at the time, from my hospital bed. My feelings were confused and violent. Pleasure that some of the boats were still afloat and would yet cheat the enemy; anger at my own helpless impotence; despair when the low roar faded into distance, and the feeling that the last link with freedom had gone.<sup>654</sup>

Though Goodwin did not apparently resent the escapees, their actions nevertheless had a profound effect on those they left behind. The MTBs and the Navy became personified with British-attributed qualities of freedom and liberty, and their departure from the colony after it had officially surrendered, reflected the symbolic final moment whereby Hong Kong shifted from Britain's 'benevolent' rule to Japanese despotism. The escapees carried Hong Kong's freedom with them, resigning those fellow servicemen they left behind to the Prisoner-of-War (POW) camps; in the words of Goodwin, 'there could be no "Dunkirk" for the beleaguered troops'<sup>655</sup>. Whereas 2<sup>nd</sup> MTB's escape from the island was celebrated, though it prompted some sense of abandonment, subsequent individual attempts to escape the POW camps, including

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<sup>653</sup> PROHK, HKRS 7-1-1716, From Captain, Extended Defence Officer to Commodore, Hong Kong, 3 May 1941.

<sup>654</sup> R.B., Goodwin, *Hongkong Escape* (London, 1953), p.213.

<sup>655</sup> *Ibid.*, p.9.

by Goodwin himself, caused stronger feelings as those left behind were made to suffer 'additional privations' such as interrogation, torture and additional arrests, as a consequence of escapees' actions<sup>656</sup>. Yet for the majority, the shared group identity of belonging to the HKRNVR overrode such separation and hardship:

We were after all still mobilised, and we lived, worked, and went through it very much as a unit. That episode [in the POW camps] is part of Hong Kong RNVR's history... It was this feeling of belonging to the HKRNVR that prompted me in writing... so much about activities of individual members who left us for weeks or months in 1940 or 1941... They were only away from us for a time, they came back to us, and even whilst away they were still representatives of the HKRNVR.<sup>657</sup>

The experience in the camps helped foster a collective memory amongst the HKRNVR of valour in defeat, which would be epitomised by the 2<sup>nd</sup> MTB, though the reality for many was less triumphant:

Every single CO had insisted that wherever there was any real fighting it was his men and his along that had been in the thick of it, and that on the rare occasions when any other unit had been seen at all they had been taking cover or running away... I think there is a very reasonable explanation of this apparently myopic and vainglorious attitude from which the various COs, especially suffered in the Camp. The fact is that after the first few days of the battle communications, co-ordination and general control by HQ Command steadily deteriorated to near vanishing point...

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<sup>656</sup> Ibid., pp.220-1.

<sup>657</sup> PROHK, HKRS 6-1-1706, J.C. McDouall to A. Sommerfelt, 5 April 1961, p.3.

COs doing their very best in the field became clueless as to what was going on elsewhere, and steadily lost all co-ordinated contact with other units. No wonder that their principal recollections 3 ½ years later, whilst still POWs, were of little but what their own men had been doing in a long series of mainly rearguard and often unsupported actions.<sup>658</sup>

The glorification of the 2<sup>nd</sup> MTB Flotilla's escape from the island has been borne out in the subsequent historiography and its popular commemoration<sup>659</sup>. The actions of 'a fleet which amounted, in one dismissive summary, to a 'few naval launches'<sup>660</sup>, has been elevated to the status of 'heroic myth', not just of the British Empire<sup>661</sup>, but the Hong Kong Chinese as well<sup>662</sup>. The latter case rests on the presence of Admiral Chan Chak, whose role in the escape, depending upon the source and historiographical viewpoint in which he is conveyed, varies between that of benign passenger to courageous leader. That his evacuation was orchestrated by the Admiralty, on its vessels, manned by its personnel, compounded by the fact that he was shot in the wrist during the retreat and already suffered the disability of an amputated leg, would heavily support the former depiction and present his actual role in the group's escape from the island as minimal, though his assistance in their crossing the Chinese mainland is less disputed:

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<sup>658</sup> Ibid., pp.3-4.

<sup>659</sup> The Hong Kong Escape Re-enactment Organisation (HERO), comprised of some of its descendents, have been particularly ardent in raising public awareness and recognition of 2<sup>nd</sup> MTB's actions, most notably through the exhibition 'Escape from Hong Kong: Road to Waichow', which opened on 24<sup>th</sup> December 2009 at the Hong Kong Museum of Coastal Defence.

<sup>660</sup> Selwyn-Clarke, *Footprints*, p.184.

<sup>661</sup> Though not specifically citing Hong Kong, John M. Mackenzie has conceptualised 'Heroic Myths of Empire', in Mackenzie (ed.), *Popular Imperialism and the Military: 1850-1950* (Manchester, 1992), pp.109-138.

<sup>662</sup> HERO place particular emphasis on this unity, highlighting that 'this was the first time in history that the Chinese and British joined forces against a common enemy': <http://www.hongkongescape.org> – mission statement. A film in Production by Lion Rock Films also features the tag-line 'An Epic Tale of East Meets West': <http://lionrockfilms.com>.

The British considered themselves to be rescuing Chan Chak: Chan Chak, however, had no doubt that *he* was rescuing *them*... Only he had the local knowledge and contact that would enable the party to proceed into the Chinese interior. Maltby's headquarters had tacitly admitted their dependence by placing the naval squadron under Chan Chak's command.<sup>663</sup>

Even then, his British companions considered him a 'gallant little Admiral'<sup>664</sup> and 'great little man'<sup>665</sup>, and despite such plaudits, these words are not indicative of reverence towards one seen as their superior. Instead, their tone is almost patronising, with emphasis on the Admiral's diminutive stature, both physically and authoritatively in the eyes of the British, who despite being lower in rank consider themselves racially and culturally superior, in that they were the ones with the 'moral authority' to bestow such approval and reinforce their position as the natural leaders. This sense of hierarchy extended to the naval authorities, in whose eyes it was 'unheard of for a commander to prejudice the safety of his ships to save two Chinese, however, distinguished'<sup>666</sup>, and thus the MTBs left the rendezvous before Chan Chak had arrived, forcing him to catch-up with them on-land. Again, this abandonment does not reflect the actions of a crew towards a Commanding Officer. Concern for Chan Chak's wellbeing came less from naval quarters and more from F.W. Kendal of the Secret Service, who believed that the nationalist Chinese leader Chiang Kai-shek would lose trust in Britain if the Admiral and his aide were captured

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<sup>663</sup> Snow, *The Fall of Hong Kong*, p.74.

<sup>664</sup> Lieutenant-Colonel Arthur Goring, cited in 'Tributes to Admiral Chan Chak', *The Escape of the 2<sup>nd</sup> MTB Flotilla*, [http://www.hongkongescape.org/images/HK/Tributes\\_to\\_CC.pdf](http://www.hongkongescape.org/images/HK/Tributes_to_CC.pdf).

<sup>665</sup> Lieutenant Commander G. H. Gandy RN (Retd.), 2<sup>nd</sup> MTB Flotilla Senior Officer, cited in 'Tributes to Admiral Chan Chak', *The Escape of the 2<sup>nd</sup> MTB Flotilla*, [http://www.hongkongescape.org/images/HK/Tributes\\_to\\_CC.pdf](http://www.hongkongescape.org/images/HK/Tributes_to_CC.pdf).

<sup>666</sup> Oliver Lindsay, *Going Down of the Sun: Hong Kong and South-East Asia 1941-1945* (London, 1981), p.7.

and likely tortured and killed<sup>667</sup>, compromising British prestige in East Asia and their military alliance.



Image 19. Admiral Chan Chak [Source: <http://www.hongkongescape.org>]

### **Military Service within Chinese Culture**

A hegemonic relationship was inculcated over the preceding decade, when Chan Chak had been in Hong Kong conducting a study of European navies from which to plan the reorganisation of that of China's, and was present at the birth of the HKNVF in 1933.<sup>668</sup> Prior to Western and Japanese incursions, 'invaders were Sinicized, and barbarians beyond the border paid humble tribute to "civilization,"

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<sup>667</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>668</sup> *South China Morning Post*, 19 September 1933.

reinforcing a Sinocentric view of Chinese civilization as universal and superior<sup>669</sup>. Confucian universalism in essence involved a 'fierce racism, rejection of other cultures... and cultural superiority'<sup>670</sup>. Confucian teachings also questioned the value of direct military action:

The traditional view held by Confucius is that caution is the better part of valor and that it ill behoves the wise man to risk his own life inappropriately. The profound pacification of the country, especially after the rule of the Mongols, greatly enhanced this mood. The empire became an empire of peace.<sup>671</sup>

Neo-Confucianism bred not only anti-foreignism, but also anti-militarism, resulting in a paradox, but one which set a precedent for the future utilisation of military knowledge from abroad:

The stress on civil virtues and the growing importance of the vaunted examination system as a channel for upward mobility led to a general decline in martial spirit. Yet even as China turned inward, her ever-present need for foreign military and administrative expertise assured that outsiders would continue to find their way into the Chinese service.<sup>672</sup>

The position of the soldier thus came to occupy 'the lowest rung of Chinese society', and giving rise to the Chinese proverb: "good iron is not used for nails; good men do

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<sup>669</sup> Peter Hays Gries, 'Narratives to Live By: The Century of Humiliation and Chinese National Identity Today', in Lionel M. Jensen and Timothy B. Weston (eds.), *China's Transformations: The Stories beyond the Headlines* (Plymouth, 2007), p.115.

<sup>670</sup> Lei Yi, 'Modern 'Sinocentricism' and 'Nationalism'', pp.49-50, cited in Peter Hays Gries, *China's New Nationalism: Pride, Politics and Diplomacy* (London, 2004), p.8.

<sup>671</sup> Max Weber, 'The Chinese Literati', H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (eds.), *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (London, 1948), p.422.

<sup>672</sup> Richard J. Smith, 'The Employment of Foreign Military Talent: Chinese Tradition and Late Ching Practice', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society Hong Kong Branch*, Vol. 15 (1975), pp.113-38, p.121.

not become soldiers"<sup>673</sup>. The military became a 'despised' occupation, and 'a cultivated literary man would not engage in social intercourse on an equal footing with army officers'<sup>674</sup>. Classed lower than merchants, the soldier was excluded from the standard Confucian list of the four occupations, as established in Chinese lore, which in descending order constituted the scholar (*shi*), farmer (*nong*), artisan (*gong*), and merchant (*shang*). This omission was because the Confucian *wenren* (literati) who did the listing regarded the practitioners of *wu* (violence) as their mortal enemies, incarnating the very evil of brute force that it was the Confucians' moral duty to extirpate in the cause of civilized behaviours.<sup>675</sup> Such cultural perceptions contributed to the difficulties in recruiting for the HKRNVR.

Demonstrations of violence and militarism were considered antithetical to Confucian notions of civilisation and Chinese cultural superiority. It has been argued by Charles Hucker among others that China thus 'became so civilized they lacked the martial values and sense of ethnicity (as opposed to culturalism) with which to fight off the invaders, who ordinarily promised to rule in the Chinese fashion'<sup>676</sup>. In this sense, they came to view themselves as a non-'martial race', an identity which was then reflected to the outside world, in external perceptions, notably Occidental ones.

The shock to the system came with the so-called 'Century of Humiliation' and increased western imperial aggression following the First Opium War which 'fundamentally dislodged Chinese intellectuals from their Confucian haven [creating

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<sup>673</sup> Morton H. Fried, 'Military Status in Chinese Society', *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 57, No. 4 (January, 1952), pp.347-357, p.348.

<sup>674</sup> Weber, 'The Chinese Literati', p.422.

<sup>675</sup> John King Fairbank and Merle Goldman, *China: A New History* (London, 2001), p.109.

<sup>676</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.109-10.

a] sense of impotence, frustration, and humiliation.<sup>677</sup> This period highlighted the technological - and by extension military and naval – disparity between China and the industrialised West, as evinced in the popular Chinese phrase “backwards/beaten” (*luohou aida*):

Interpreted as “the backwards *will be* beaten” (*luohou jiuyao aida*), the phrase implies that the former caused the latter: economic and technological backwardness led to China’s defeat at the hands of the West.<sup>678</sup>

Therefore modernisation of its military along Western lines came to be viewed as a way of reversing this 'backwardness'. Thus, in modelling China’s navy on the Royal Navy and with the latter's assistance, Chan Chak and the Chinese Government acknowledged British superiority not only in naval equipment and organisation, but also culturally, fostering a teacher-student dynamic.

The British were cast in a leadership role, not only to the Hong Kong Chinese who came under their 'formal' jurisdiction, but to the sovereign Republic of China who consequently fell under their 'informal' influence in this context. This cultural hierarchy then disseminated down to inform the personal level of interaction between individual officers and ratings. This superseded the organisational hierarchy of rank, for though such chains of command were outwardly similar and semantically identifiable, the cultural and racial status attached to such positions was disproportionate; a Chinese Admiral did not command the same level of professional respect as a British one. He was only allowed to direct 2<sup>nd</sup> MTB by the grace of Lt.

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<sup>677</sup> Tu Wei-ming, *Cultural China*, p.2, cited in Hays Gries, *China's New Nationalism*, pp.47-8.

<sup>678</sup> Original italicisation. Peter Hays Gries, *China's New Nationalism: Pride, Politics and Diplomacy* (London, 2004), p.50.



Commander Gandy, the flotilla's Commanding Officer, who realised that he and his men could use the Admiral's local knowledge once they landed on the Chinese mainland.

## Chinese Historical Memory

The retrospective glorification of Admiral Chan Chak's role in the escape from the island, and the rise of Hong Kong's 'heroic myth', can be better understood when considered in relation to ideological shifts in Chinese historiography over the last sixty years in response to the state's use of historical memory. It has been said that 'forging a country's collective memory is an integral part of nation-building... with the aim of consolidating the bond between the individual citizen and the homeland'.<sup>679</sup> When the CCP defeated the KMT in the Chinese Civil War and founded the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, to help consolidate and legitimise its newfound power amongst the wider populace, the Maoist regime consciously sought to alter the country's collective memory. Instead of the nationalist depiction of China as victims of the West, 'the Maoist account of the Century highlighted the heroism of the anti-feudal, anti-imperialist masses in throwing off their chains and repelling foreign invaders... New China needed heroes.'<sup>680</sup> In the words of Mao Zedong, "The Chinese people have stood up", thus marking the end of the 'Century of Humiliation'; 'the civil war between the Communists and Chiang Kei-shek's Nationalist Party was

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<sup>679</sup> Zheng Wang, 'National Humiliation, History Education, and the Politics of Historical Memory: Patriotic Education Campaign in China', *International Studies Quarterly* (2008), Vol. 52, pp.783-806, p.783.

<sup>680</sup> Gries, 'Narratives to Live By', p.116.

over, foreign influence had been driven from the mainland, and, from an ideological perspective, socialism had defeated capitalism.<sup>681</sup>

The Maoist 'victor narrative' was an ideological attack on both colonialism and capitalism, posing an economic, political, and social threat to the British in Hong Kong, whose ongoing prosperity and presence there rested on the principles of free trade. Therefore, a 'heroic' narrative of their own needed to be developed and was proliferated, emphasising a sense of victory even in the 'humiliation' of defeat by an Asian power, to counteract Communist discourse, defend British imperialism from internal and external dissidents, and forge a more distinctive Hong Kong Chinese identity separate from the mainland. Whereas the PRC used historical memory to build a nation-state based upon a shared Communist identity, the British used historical memory of the war to dissociate Chinese ethnicity from race, and promote an alternative Chinese identity more closely aligned to British colonial and capitalist interests. Seeking to reassert control over the colony following the Japanese invasion, Britain needed to reaffirm her moral and political authority there, fearing possible Communist subversion from the growing tide of immigrants from the Chinese mainland. Since its founding, 'laissez-faireism' had encouraged Hong Kong's growth as a free port through economic migration, but meant that the colony developed as 'a commercial centre where there is no culture'<sup>682</sup>, giving rise to British fears over Chinese loyalty in the HKRNVR. In a post-war policy shift, there was a more conscious effort on the part of the colonial authorities to forge a greater sense

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<sup>681</sup> This is one historical narrative, and it is debated whether the defeat of the Japanese in 1945 marked the official end of the 'Century', whether it ended with the reunification of China with Hong Kong and Macao, or whether it is still ongoing due to the ongoing disunity with Chinese Taipei (Taiwan). See Gries, 'Narratives to Live By', p.119.

<sup>682</sup> Document VI.a4: Yu Sheng, 'Notes on Hong Kong' (source: *Ch'ien-t'u*, volume 2, no.5, 1 May 1934), in Steve Tsang (ed.), *Government and Politics: A Documentary History of Hong Kong* (Hong Kong, 1995), p.239.

and awareness of a 'Hong Kong' identity, to foster a 'Hongkonger' community, less transient or aligned to allegiances on the mainland.

The promotion of a 'heroic myth' based upon Hong Kong's brave last stand and the 2<sup>nd</sup> MTB flotilla's escape, where both its Chinese and non-Chinese population fought together side-by-side against a common enemy, was thus one tool for rectifying this and inculcating a sense of civic pride and unity that cut across ethnic boundaries to bind together both groups within a shared Hong Kong identity. The fact that the colony had been expected to hold out for ninety days and had managed just eighteen<sup>683</sup>, with the HKRNVR experiencing a significant number of Chinese desertions over that period, was immaterial. It was not only 'New China' who 'needed heroes', to extend Peter Hays Gries' argument; in response, British Hong Kong needed heroes of its own. Paradoxically, Chan Chak filled that role for the colonial authorities; he was Chinese, anti-Communist, he respected and was deferential to British (naval) hegemony and tradition having also been awarded the K.B.E. (Knight Commander of the British Empire) for his work with the colonial authorities, and he epitomised the collaborative spirit between the British and Chinese which it emphasised was essential to the mutual prosperity of both communities in Hong Kong. Though Chan Chak was sent by Chiang Kai-shek in 1938 to take charge of the Nationalist underground there, he had ended up 'working quietly with the British police and intelligence services'<sup>684</sup>. He thus actively collaborated with the colonial authorities to fortify their position of control. Though Chan Chak the man was not from Hong Kong himself, his idealised 'spirit' became rooted in the colony, and became a rallying symbol for 'Hongkonger' nationalism,

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<sup>683</sup> Snow, *The Fall of Hong Kong*, p.73.

<sup>684</sup> *Ibid.*, p.41.

representing its own collective strength and perseverance during wartime in the face of overwhelming odds. Gries has argued that 'war is at once the graveyard of peoples and the birthplace of nations. Most nations are born out of the ashes of war; indeed, nations define themselves through conflict with other nations'<sup>685</sup>. Its invasion by the Japanese in the Second World War was the moment Hong Kong and its people came of age, changing its relationship with both Britain and China invariably.

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<sup>685</sup> Michael Howard, *Causes of War* (1983), cited in Gries, *China's New Nationalism*, p.69.

## Part Two: Post-Second World War

### Restoring Imperial 'Face'

The initial defeat of Britain by an Asian power in the Second World War marked a shift in Chinese attitudes towards British power, compounded by their elevation in the new post-war international system to one of the 'big five' powers. According to Steve Tsang, 'the Chinese no longer tolerated a slag in the face as readily as they had done before the war'.<sup>686</sup> Whereas Chinese prestige increased, Britain's had diminished, and to the British naval authorities returning to Hong Kong, the restoration of their own prestige, or 'face', in the eyes of the local Chinese population, was inexorably tied to their ability to legitimately re-establish colonial power:

"Face" (=prestige) is important to the Oriental. When we surrendered Hong Kong we lost face; we now have to regain Hong Kong and face. The Chinese will judge us by our behaviour ashore and first impressions will count.<sup>687</sup>

Though the intrinsic notion of the civilising mission under British leadership remained, the language of it had altered from a providentially ordained right to rule, to a more progressive, constructive and cooperative discourse of development. As with Governor Young's plans for political reform, there was a more pronounced

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<sup>686</sup> Steve Tsang, *Governing Hong Kong* (Hong Kong, 2007), p.54.

<sup>687</sup> PROHK, HKMS No.74 1-1, 'Some Instructions and Hints in the Event of Surrender By the Japanese. Precautions Against Treachery', Enclosure to Commander Task Force 111.2 No. 1039/1 dated 21<sup>st</sup> August, 1945, p.2.

realisation that Britain's position in Hong Kong was more precarious and could only be maintained in closer collaboration with the local Chinese population, and that relationship needed to be built upon increased cultural understanding as opposed to a notion of inherent respect based upon racial hierarchy. Steve Tsang has termed this 'the 1946 outlook', which recognised that 'the very survival of British rule in Hong Kong would depend on winning over the hearts and minds of the majority Chinese residents'<sup>688</sup>. This new spirit of tolerance was symbolised most poignantly by the removal of the long-established colour bar which prohibited Chinese from residing on the Peak. These progressive changes, however, were born largely out of political pragmatism. During the war, an understanding was reached between the British Government and Chiang Kai-shek that the issue of the New Territories and Hong Kong could be addressed after the defeat of Japan. Governor Young believed that 'given the Chinese Government's determination to recover Hong Kong... the only way to keep the colony British was to make the local inhabitants want to do so'<sup>689</sup>. For that to happen, they needed to be transformed 'from Chinese sojourners into citizens of British Hong Kong'<sup>690</sup>. Political and social reform, like cultural devices such historical memory and heroic myth, were thus tools consciously utilised by Britain to forge a sympathetic 'Hongkonger' identity which would help the reestablishment of British imperial rule there.

To understand 'face' within this context, however, one must appreciate its more nuanced meaning within Chinese culture, evinced in its dual translation as both *lien* and *mien-tzu*:

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<sup>688</sup> Tsang, *Government and Politics*, p.6.

<sup>689</sup> Steve Tsang, *Democracy Shelved: Great Britain, China and Attempts at Constitutional Reform in Hong Kong 1945-1952* (Oxford, 1988), p.186.

<sup>690</sup> Steve Tsang, *A Modern History of Hong Kong* (London, 2007), pp.43-4.

*Mien-tzu*, stands for the kind of prestige that is emphasized in this country [America]: a reputation achieved through getting on in life, through success and ostentation. This is prestige that is accumulated by means of personal effort or clever maneuvering... The other kind of "face", *lien*... is the respect of the group for a man with a good moral reputation... It represents the confidence of society in the integrity of ego's moral character, the loss of which makes it impossible to function properly within the community.<sup>691</sup>

Though Britain had acquired power and *mien-tzu* through economic and military strength, her actions at the outset of the Second World War were seen as unbecoming of her high status and the moral character that was expected of one in that position, causing Britain to lose *lien* in the eyes of the Chinese:

The appeasement policy of Chamberlain up to the outbreak of the European War, in the face of Britain's treaty to smaller nations, was felt as extremely "*lien*-losing" in China. To be unwilling to keep promises to weaker nations because of its own interests was neither compatible with its claim to status as the most powerful empire of the world, nor with the desire of the leaders of the nation to be termed gentlemen.<sup>692</sup>

There was a belief that this behaviour had spread to Britain's dealings with China too, and 'in their eyes the British were feeling their way to a 'Far Eastern Munich'<sup>693</sup>. *Lien*, or moral conduct, thus appears to have held more gravitas and effect for the Chinese

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<sup>691</sup> Hsein Chin Hu, 'The Chinese Concept of Face', *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 46, No. 1 (January - March, 1944), pp.45-64, p.45.

<sup>692</sup> *Ibid.*, p.48.

<sup>693</sup> Xia, 'Liao Chengzhi zai Xianggang', p.156, cited in Snow, *The Fall of Hong Kong*, p.33.

population than expressions of British material supremacy, such as the Navy or finance, constituting *mien-tzu*, in maintaining Britain's imperial authority. This also raises a significant parallel within imperial theory and the Gramscian notion of hegemony, whereby political power flows from moral authority rather than force. The erosion of Britain's *lien* had a foreboding antecedent in the Republic of China, where a similar neglect of *lien* had contributed to internal unrest there:

Once wealth is acquired, power attained and position consolidated, they trust their *mien-tzu* to be strong enough to hush talk about their moral character. The warlords during the early part of the Republic are a good example. Each of them maintained his power by military force, perpetrating many crimes for the sake of money... They believed that they could maintain their position and prestige by means of money and military force, but their disregard for *lien* earned them the contempt of their nation.<sup>694</sup>

Flaunting British *mien-tzu* through a show of naval theatre in Rear-Admiral Sir Cecil Harcourt's impressive returning British Pacific Fleet and the promise of commercial growth were thus not enough; the British had to also restore their *lien* to prevent Hong Kong going the same way, and forever losing her position there.

The desire and need to regain *face* in the eyes of the Chinese can also help explain the development of Hong Kong's wartime heroic myth. The twentieth century Chinese writer, Lu Xun, critiqued the Chinese 'vain desire for *face*' in his caricature,

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<sup>694</sup> Hsein Chin Hu, 'The Chinese Concept of Face', *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 46, No. 1 (January - March, 1944), pp.45-64, p.64.



Ah Q, known for his 'psychological victory technique' by which he maintains an inflated sense of himself<sup>695</sup>:

After suffering humiliating public beatings, Ah Q frequently hits himself.

Why? Ah Q sought to fool himself into thinking that he was actually giving

- not receiving - a licking.<sup>696</sup>

Lu Xun suggests that by turning defeats into victories, Ah Q is able to save face. Gries has demonstrated that 'many Chinese narratives of Sino-American and Sino-Japanese military encounters... transform defeats into heroic victories with an Ah Q-like magic'<sup>697</sup>. It can be argued that this revisionist tradition extends to the Battle of Hong Kong, not just within Chinese narratives but British ones too. British authority had given her a high degree of *mien-tzu*, but whereas one 'who has *mien-tzu* is in a position to exercise considerable influence, even control of others in both direct and indirect ways... he is under strong constraint to act in a manner consistent with the requirements for maintaining his *mien-tzu*'<sup>698</sup>. When Governor Young surrendered to the Japanese on Christmas Day in 1941, it could be deemed that Britain had failed to act in the manner expected of her preeminent position, having failed to defend Hong Kong and her citizens of a lesser *mien-tzu*, who looked up to her because of the impression of 'British invincibility' that had been falsely conveyed to them. Britain thus correspondingly lost *lien*. Consequently, in 1942 the Ministry of Information put forward a new scheme for propaganda in China with the aim of re-establishing

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<sup>695</sup> Gries, *China's New Nationalism*, p.27.

<sup>696</sup> Lu Xun, 'True Story of Ah Q'. p.75 cited in *ibid.*, p.27.

<sup>697</sup> *ibid.*, p.28.

<sup>698</sup> David Yau-fai Ho, 'On the Concept of Face', *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol.81, No.4 (January, 1976), pp.867-884, p.873.

British prestige there.<sup>699</sup> By resorting to Ah Q's 'psychological victory technique', the British could turn defeat at Hong Kong into victory, perpetuated via 'heroic myth', in order to help restore lost *lien*.

There exists a phrase, *fu-yen mien-tzu*, or "padding (someone's) *mien-tzu*"<sup>700</sup>. This is where one will show another person just enough deference so as to obtain their goodwill, though it may hide one's true judgement. The British were seen as being guilty of this during the war:

A Chinese student remarked one day that all through the Sino-Japanese war the British had been *fu-yenning* China's *mien-tzu*, encouraging her to fight on, and making promises when necessary, but sending only a minimum of effective aid. This expressed clearly that the student had no confidence in Britain's sincerity.<sup>701</sup>

The gentleman's agreement made with Chiang Kai-shek regarding discussion over the issue of the New Territories can be viewed as another case, co-opting an 'ally' through vague, and ultimately false, promises. The British also reneged on an earlier understanding that as Allied Commander of the China theatre, Hong Kong was 'within the operational sphere of Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek', and that as laid down in General Order No.1, the Japanese forces in Hong Kong should surrender to Chiang<sup>702</sup>; however, the British dispatched Rear Admiral Harcourt's task force to Hong Kong to formally accept the Japanese surrender ahead of Chiang's army.

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<sup>699</sup> Christopher Thorne, 'Wartime British Planning for the Post-War Far East', in Ian Nish (ed.), *Anglo-Japanese Alienation, 1919-1952: Papers of the Anglo-Japanese Conference on the History of the Second World War* (Cambridge, 1982), p.205.

<sup>700</sup> Hsein, 'The Chinese Concept of Face', p.59

<sup>701</sup> Idem.

<sup>702</sup> FO371/46251, Undated note, 'Arrangements for the Administration of Hong Kong in the Event of its Liberation by Regular Chinese Forces', c. late July 1945, cited in Tsang, *A Modern History of Hong Kong*, p.133.

by acknowledging his 'authority', the reality was that Britain considered it 'a point of national honour... to recover [Hong Kong], and restore it to its normal state and prosperity'<sup>703</sup>. Furthermore, Chiang could not be allowed to reach Hong Kong ahead of them, as 'once in occupation, a Chinese force of whatever nature might prove difficult to extrude by diplomatic means'<sup>704</sup>. Thus, being the first ones to recover Hong Kong was considered very important for British 'prestige and future relations with China'<sup>705</sup>. Yet this proved counter-productive, as upon hearing of the British action, the Chinese Government was offended by their 'rather high-handed' behaviour<sup>706</sup>, which further compromised Britain's *lien*. In *fu-yenning* China's *mien-tzu* in these instances, Britain shrouded her own ulterior motives and superior attitudes beneath a veil of equanimity; to act in this way diminished her moral integrity and *lien*, losing her Chinese respect and trust.

Though, the concept had indigenous roots, during the nineteenth century, 'face' became utilised by the British missionary Arthur Smith to emphasise the defects of 'Chinese racial character' and justify his Christian civilising mission, thus it became integrated into Orientalist discourse:

*Face*, it seems, represented duplicitous Oriental "disguise." Fearful of society - "the mob" and its unruly passions - classical Liberals began to use words like *face* to project their fears about society and the emotions onto the Orient, the realm of the mindless Yellow Horde. Paradoxically,

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<sup>703</sup> FO371/46251, 'The Political Issues between Great Britain and China regarding Hong Kong', 7 July 1945, cited in *ibid.*, p.132.

<sup>704</sup> HS1/171, Rait's minute to DDMI (P/W), 19 August 1944, cited in *idem*.

<sup>705</sup> HS1/171, Britmis Chungking to War Office, 200900H, 20 July 1945, cited in *idem*.

<sup>706</sup> FO371/46252, Chungking to Foreign Office 857, 16 August 1945, cited in *ibid.*, p.134.

the East came to represent both a passive "herd mentality" and a cunning duplicitousness to Western minds. This helped preserve the good qualities of individualism and rationality for Liberalism and the West.<sup>707</sup>

Now those qualities of individualism were needed again to rebuild British capitalism in Hong Kong, yet because their 'face' in the eyes of the Chinese had been compromised, they needed to reconcile this first. As sociologist David Ho points out, 'Face is never a purely individual thing. It does not make sense to speak of the face of an individual as something lodged within his person; it is meaningful only when his face is considered in relation to that of others in the social network'<sup>708</sup>. 'Face' had traditionally been ascribed to the Oriental 'other', as a characteristic which lowered him in relation to the European. Whereas originally the British were the ones looking upon Chinese 'face', often down from an elevated position, now British 'face' was the one being scrutinised by the eyes of the Chinese; their roles had been reversed; the Chinese could now look the British in the eye, and in order to do so, they had acquired an equal footing. The British now had to appeal to Chinese perceptions and values, and altered their own actions and behaviour accordingly; now the Chinese were setting a moral standard for the British to aspire to in order to regain *lien* in their eyes, essential for the restoration of *mien-tzu* and colonial authority. This was emphasised to returning British naval personnel:

The behaviour and bearing of our landing parties must be exemplary. There will be numerous temptations, values may have changed and liquor of a kind available for barter, women camp followers of the Japanese will be seeking new patronage, etc., etc. The Chinese have great dignity. For

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<sup>707</sup> Gries, *China's New Nationalism*, pp.22-3.

<sup>708</sup> Ho, 'On the Concept of Face', p.882.

instance, they are never seen drunk in public, whatever they may do in private, and for a British rank or rating to misbehave with wine or women at this time will do us no good.<sup>709</sup>

In particular, the 'rape of Nanking' by the Japanese had prompted a resurrection of the 'recurring figure of China as a raped woman' within nationalist discourse, causing many young Chinese men to become 'enraged by the very idea of white men intimately involved with Chinese women'<sup>710</sup>. Before the war, relationships with local women had been tolerated by the Navy, albeit as 'the sordid pursuit of low-grade whites'<sup>711</sup>. This dynamic had been exploited by Japanese espionage efforts before the invasion, in particular at Nagasaki Joe's, a popular Japanese bar in the Wanchai district, where 'a pint of beer cost ten cents less than anywhere else in town; and the girls made a beeline for British naval ratings' to gather information<sup>712</sup>. HKRNVR officers fraternising with foreigners in the Hong Kong Club had to be warned about 'careless conversation about service matters such as ship movements'<sup>713</sup>. Now, not only were the Chinese more protective of both their female members and their new status, any such intimate association, regardless of 'rank or rating', was considered even less desirable and more threatening by the British, having been undermined once before. Despite designs to win over the local population, there remained a suspicion of too close an interaction. Returning naval personnel had to tread a difficult balance between approaching the Hong Kong Chinese as friends on the one-hand, and maintaining a reserved and respectful distance on the other:

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<sup>709</sup> PROHK, HKMS No.74 1-1, 'Some Instructions and Hints in the Event of Surrender By the Japanese. Precautions Against Treachery', Enclosure to Commander Task Force 111.2 No. 1039/1 dated 21<sup>st</sup> August, 1945, p.2.

<sup>710</sup> Gries, *China's New Nationalism*, p.10.

<sup>711</sup> Snow, *The Fall of Hong Kong*, p.11.

<sup>712</sup> Ibid. p.36.

<sup>713</sup> PROHK, HKRS 7-1-1771(1), C-in-C's Memorandum No.2527, 10 January 1940, p.3.

In dealing with the Chinese good humour and a sense of humour always help. If you make a Chinese laugh, preferably with you, not at you, things should be well. In the case of the Chinese the difficulty will not be to keep away from them, but to keep them away from you. They will be keen to help in any way and will try to join up as washers up, sweepers, dhobi boys, etc. This must not be allowed, anyway to begin with.<sup>714</sup>

Yet, as the saying *fu-yen mien-tzu* implies, though the British may have been padding Chinese *mien-tzu* by praising Chinese 'great dignity' and 'humour' in this manner, it covered up true reflections, and officially the line reiterated upon their return was to 'regard all Orientals with suspicion'<sup>715</sup>. Though the British were now more conscious of reflecting a positive 'face' of their own, the pejorative view clearly still continued in relation to that of the local population. In particular, the previously metaphorical 'Oriental "disguise"' had taken on a dangerous new physical and quite literal manifestation:

Inexperienced people are unable to distinguish between Japanese and Chinese. A favourite Japanese trick is to adopt Chinese dress and to hide a bomb, grenade or machine gun under the long gown. It is appreciated that many old friends of China Station days such as mess-boys, sampan men, side-party "Marys", cobblers, tailors and dhobi men will be anxious to renew relations, but at present all Orientals must be treated with suspicion.<sup>716</sup>

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<sup>714</sup> PROHK, HKMS No.74 1-1, 'Some Instructions and Hints in the Event of Surrender By the Japanese. Precautions Against Treachery', Enclosure to Commander Task Force 111.2 No. 1039/1 dated 21<sup>st</sup> August, 1945, p.2.

<sup>715</sup> Idem.

<sup>716</sup> Idem.

This tricky tension between presenting a more positive, equitable attitude towards the Chinese population and maintaining the imperial status quo affected the discussions regarding war gratuities. During these, the institutionalised discrimination which had underpinned the force's chain of command came to light, along with its prevailing influence, presenting some uncomfortable dilemmas. Though the HKRNVR was not as clearly divided along racial lines as some colonial naval volunteer forces, in that some Europeans filled the enlisted rates as well as the officer ranks, this equal footing with the Chinese rates was shared merely on a superficial level during peacetime, and was not a desirable situation for war. Plans had therefore been put in place to ensure European command over the Chinese during the heat of battle:

Up to July 1941 no Europeans were serving as seamen but it was agreed that when they were called into service they would receive Admiralty sterling rates... They would also be promoted Petty Officers in charge of guns' crews to give them seniority over the Chinese seamen guns' crews.<sup>717</sup>

Inequalities also existed financially, with the rates of pay and allowances given to 'Asiatic ratings' in the HKRNVR, 'of a much lower standard' than those of European ratings, and with no marriage allowances provided for<sup>718</sup>. Again, conscious of their tentative post-war position in the colony and need to appeal for Chinese 'hearts and minds', the British accepted that 'it would appear unfair generally to introduce two different rates, i.e. British European rates for Pay and Allowances, and Chinese rates for "War Gratuities". Another issue was the fact that the 'Asiatic other ranks' of the

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<sup>717</sup> TNA, CO 825/41/7, Item 76, 'Note By the Hong Kong Finance Liaison Officer'.

<sup>718</sup> TNA, CO 825/41/7, Item 12, From Acting Commanding Officer, HKRNVR to C.C.A.O., 18 March 1946.

military Hong Kong Volunteer Defence Corps, were being paid British European Service rates, having not been mobilised till December 1941, much later than the naval force. Though these factors advocated that the gratuity received by the HKRNVR's Chinese ratings should be brought in line with Europeans', such considerations presented a potential can of worms to the Admiralty. If such a motion was passed, it would have wider ramifications, not just on Hong Kong, but on the fleet and its finances as a whole, for there were a significant number Chinese personnel serving aboard regular Royal Navy vessels, namely through the LEP, 'who were doing much the same sort of work as HKRNVR ratings, [and] will have cause for complaint'<sup>719</sup>. What this indicates is that the Chinese serving in the Royal Navy itself, among largely British crews, were more accepting of their subordinate position and the disparity in pay that brought with it. It was only the prospect that another Chinese rating might receive more than them that threatened to destabilise that delicate balance. The Hong Kong-based Chinese in contrast, on account of their first-hand experience of the Japanese and Britain's defeat, had been awakened to such imperial inequalities and were no longer willing to conform to them. Such were the complex problems Britain faced in trying to reassert and maintain her power after the war. The old paradigms had shifted; ethnic groups could no longer be conveniently categorised and treated with blanket uniformity.

The financial complaints extended further. Personnel from outside Hong Kong, who were entitled to repatriation but had elected to remain in the colony, were afforded a cash grant in lieu of the usual Overseas Benefit Leave. This had wrongly

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<sup>719</sup> *Idem.*



been extended to certain European HKRNVR personnel, despite the fact they 'belonged to Hong Kong', causing further grievance for the Chinese ratings:

This mistake had led to discrimination, which in effect was racial discrimination and in consequence there was amongst the Hong Kong Volunteers demobilised in the colony a feeling of considerable discontent<sup>720</sup>.

To offset this, the Colonial Office was asked to sanction an ex gratia cash grant in lieu of the cash equivalent of overseas benefit leave to all Hong Kong Volunteers domiciled and demobilized in the colony.

There were also issues over back pay. Following Hong Kong's defeat, all services personnel in the colony were given until June 1943 to report to Waichow, roughly seventy miles from Hong Kong, where they would be given six months back pay. Those who had not reported at Waichow were to receive only one month's back pay. Yet, 'representatives of the HKRNVR... had no knowledge relative to anyone having to report at Waichow during the Japanese occupation'. In addition, a 'HKRNVR representative questioned some of his ratings now in Hong Kong and they state that they never heard of such an order'. In recognition of the unofficial contribution volunteers continued to make to the Allied cause even after the colony's fall, but more significantly wanting to again avoid any further charges of racial prejudice with future security considerations in mind, back pay was subsequently granted to all personnel released or who escaped before 1 August 1945:

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<sup>720</sup> TNA, CO 825/41/7, Item 23, 'Record of the First Meeting of the Hong Kong Forces, War Service Committee held on 12<sup>th</sup> December, 1945'.

We feel that in the interests of future volunteering, it would be very unwise to take unequal treatment in our forces such as recommended by the committee. It must be remembered that many volunteers who did remain in Hongkong suffered hardships and were beaten up and imprisoned by the Japanese simply because they were Volunteers, and in many cases because they were suspected of intriguing on behalf of the Allied Cause by sending money and food into the POW camps, etc., and by assisting in 'escapes'.<sup>721</sup>

## Reconstitution

The defeat of Japan did not in itself ease Britain's defensive burden, if anything it reinstated its pre-war imperial commitments, and colonial volunteers were still seen as a necessary solution to overstretch. One of the big debates over the next three years was whether to establish a permanent, full-time local naval force, along the lines of the Malayan Naval Force, or resurrect a part-time volunteer unit along similar lines to the old HKRNVR. The Admiralty favoured the former, but faced an opponent in the form of the Governor, who believed that the money spent on such a force might 'be better applied to the expansion of the Water Police'<sup>722</sup>. Again, the tug of war between Admiralty and local interests with regards to control over such a unit arises here, and a big concern continues to be manpower. Despite

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<sup>721</sup> TNA, CO 825/41/7, Item 20, 'Back Pay of locally enlisted Volunteers (other ranks and ratings)', From Representatives, HKRNVR and HKVDC to The Chairman, Hongkong Forces War Service Committee, 15 December 1946.

<sup>722</sup> TNA, CO 537/4163, 'Extract from the Governor of Hong Kong's Secret despatch of the 21<sup>st</sup> October, 1946'.

overtures being made to the Chinese community through official colonial channels, unofficially it was still believed they could not be relied upon, demonstrated by the desertions witnessed during the Battle of Hong Kong. A significant change was the nature of the likely enemy Hong Kong could now face, namely from China. Local recruitment of officers for the Force was seen to 'present considerable difficulty', in the fact that 'the non-commissioned ranks... would of necessity be mainly or wholly of Chinese race, and this factor would vitiate the potential value of the Force as a whole in any emergency which can be visualised as likely to arise in the future'<sup>723</sup>.

The 'most probable form of emergency' conceived by the local Government at this time, was not so much direct attack from a foreign power, but 'civil disturbance involving a general strike and the cessation of essential services, possibly combined with or in sympathy with an external threat from a warlord operating in South China'<sup>724</sup>. In such a scenario, it was expected that 'no assistance of any sort will be forthcoming from the Chinese population, and the Colony may have to be maintained by the efforts of the non-Chinese population alone'. In the words of Governor Grantham:

The final, and in my view, decisive point against the formation of a local naval force is the questions of crews. The maintenance of such a force would entail the enlistment of a large number of Asiatics as ratings. It has already been explained that the most probable emergency in which Government forces would be employed is that of civil disturbances involving the disaffection of almost the entire Chinese populace. In these

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<sup>723</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>724</sup> TNA, CO 537/4163, Secretariat File No: 6/1397/46TS, Appendix V. Annex I, Government House, Hong Kong, 6 August 1947, p.5.

circumstances the ships of a local naval force would in all probability cease to be effective units and would become a liability rather than an asset.<sup>725</sup>

Again, despite the public façade of conciliation, key figures in the British administration still did not trust the Chinese come the crunch. A significant factor here was the huge post-war influx of immigrants from mainland China, with Hong Kong's population rising from around 600,000 in 1945 to over 2 million in 1950, and then 2.5 million in 1955<sup>726</sup>, increasing potential anti-colonial subversives. Consequently, any such scheme would 'likely detract from the [European] manpower available for the Hong Kong Volunteer Defence Corps and the manning of essential services', which a naval force would be less equipped to deal with. It was 'for these reasons it has been felt that the establishment of a local naval force in Hong Kong would be wasteful and without justification'<sup>727</sup>.

The Overseas Defence Committee concurred with Governor Grantham that the establishment of a permanent naval force in Hong Kong was unfeasible. However, it did conclude that as an alternative, the formation of a new volunteer force 'would be justified on account of its value in time of war', despite the fact that it 'would have little value in case of civil disturbances'<sup>728</sup>. At the same time, it was decided to re-establish the Hong Kong Volunteer Defence Corps. Several issues were raised, however, which were seen as prohibitive to the reconstitution of the two individual forces along the same pre-war lines. Again, it was stressed that 'there is

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<sup>725</sup> Ibid., p.6.

<sup>726</sup> Tsang, *A Modern History of Hong Kong*, p.167.

<sup>727</sup> TNA, CO 537/4163, Secretariat File No: 6/1397/46TS, Appendix V. Annex I, Government House, Hong Kong, 6 August 1947, p.6.

<sup>728</sup> TNA, CO 537/4163, 'From the Secretary of State for the Colonies To the Officer Administering the Government of Hong Kong', 2 January 1948.

no doubt that the greatest single problem facing the civil administration is the shortage of reliable manpower<sup>729</sup>. There was a fear within Government circles back in Britain that 'China, assisted by her large expatriate communities in south-east Asia, could become an even greater menace to Britain's interests than Japan had been.'<sup>730</sup> 'It would not be possible', it was thus considered, 'in the event of war with China, to rely on the great majority of Chinese in the Colony'. Whereas before the war there had been doubts about Chinese allegiance to Hong Kong and the extent to which they could be trusted to stay and defend a place they did not consider their first home, despite actions to this effect by some during the Japanese invasion, such suspicions had now evolved into outright distrust:

The dangers that those responsible for the Colony's defence consider most probable are internal unrest, and attacks by guerrilla forces from without, or a combination of the two. Briefly, in the circumstances envisaged it is not improbable that the vast majority of the Chinese who preponderate in the Colony would be, at best, of no assistance to the Government, and, at the worst, actually hostile.<sup>731</sup>

It was concluded that both the potential threat and 'support obtained from the Chinese will depend, more than on any other single factor, on the military strength of the Colony's defences'<sup>732</sup>. There was still a clear belief in the power of British military and naval prestige. With this in mind, it was even more essential that the local

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<sup>729</sup> TNA, CAB 21/2431, 'Extract from report on Progress made in planning civil measures for defence', p.6.

<sup>730</sup> Christopher Thorne, 'Wartime British Planning for the Post-War Far East', in Ian Nish (ed.), *Anglo-Japanese Alienation, 1919-1952: Papers of the Anglo-Japanese Conference on the History of the Second World War* (Cambridge, 1982), pp.215-6.

<sup>731</sup> TNA, CAB 21/2431, 'The Hong Kong Defence Force', p.2.

<sup>732</sup> TNA, CAB 21/2431, 'Extract from report on Progress made in planning civil measures for defence', p.6.

defence forces be re-established. It was estimated that the number of reliable non-Chinese civilians in the Colony was only 6,000, including adult males and 'such adult females as are in a position to assist. Yet, it was considered that 'something like 15,800 persons are required to man all civilian service, including the local forces and the Police', and consequently, 'every single reliable non-Chinese will be needed to play a part and not infrequently two parts'. It was thus unavoidable that 'very considerable reliance must be placed on Chinese'<sup>733</sup>, despite reservations. The manpower issue was exacerbated by the fact that recruitment for the reconstituted forces would be virtually from scratch, as 'many members of the [previous] forces had been killed or had died while prisoners-of-war, others had passed the age limit for service', and in another example of Hong Kong's transient nature, 'some had retired from Hong Kong never to return'<sup>734</sup>.

The first-hand negative civilian experience of the Japanese invasion acted as a disincentive, prompting a 'reluctance of the general public to come forward for voluntary service so soon after a war'. This was marked 'by a certain cynicism, bred by the events of 1941-45, regarding the value of defence preparations'<sup>735</sup>; it was not merely the Chinese population who were affected by British prestige, or a seeming absence of it in this instance. British defeat to the Japanese, and a sense of abandonment further fostered by the Governor's response to Hong Kong's downgrading as a strategic port<sup>736</sup>, clearly resonated more broadly within the colony. Rather than galvanising the local population into taking responsibility for their own

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<sup>733</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>734</sup> TNA, CAB 21/2431, 'The Hong Kong Defence Force', p.1.

<sup>735</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>736</sup> Class C - "A port at which it will be impossible or unnecessary to install or store defences in peacetime, but for which defence schemes should be prepared to meet Probable wartime uses" - TNA, CO 537/4163, Secretariat File No: 6/1397/46TS, Appendix V. Annex I, Government House, Hong Kong, 6 August 1947, p.6.

defence, as one might expect<sup>737</sup>, it had the adverse effect, increasing Hong Kong's dependence on Britain.

There were not merely manpower issues to contend with either. How to fund two separate local defence forces was a difficult question to reconcile due to 'financial stringency brought about by many calls upon the Colony's revenue in the years of reconstruction consequent upon the damage received during the war years'<sup>738</sup>. The realities of active service in 1941 had also 'revealed a number of defects in the status of the Volunteer Forces and their organisation'<sup>739</sup>. In the case of the HKRNVR, they had to contend with the overriding demands of the Royal Navy, with their needs subordinated on account of the fact that they were funded by the Colonial and not Imperial Government, causing 'endless complications and expense'<sup>740</sup>. It was realised that 'those who are coming back to Hong Kong will soon be all here and unless we are able to maintain their interest they will drift out of touch or become involved with other Units'. Of particular worry was the Navy's traditional rivalry with the HKVDC, 'who have the advantage of a HQ building, will soon be recruiting and we may lose some promising material'. Yet, Commander Vernall, the HKRNVR Commanding Officer, also faced direct competition from the Royal Navy itself, who were drawing on colonial manpower to reinforce their regular ranks. Again, the determining factor was racial in nature, with Vernall stating 'I am concerned

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<sup>737</sup> There is a precedent in the case of Australia, which made a concerted effort to form its own navy following the apparent British abandonment of them to the Japanese with the 1902 treaty.

<sup>738</sup> TNA, CAB 21/2431, 'The Hong Kong Defence Force', p.1.

<sup>739</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>740</sup> PROHK, HKRS 6-1-1695, 'Future of the HKRNVR', P.J. Vernall, Cmdr., HKRNVR, CO, 9 November 1946, p.1.

primarily with the European personnel since most of my best ratings have joined the Royal Navy or Police and are lost to me'<sup>741</sup>.

The solution, rather than reorganising the two distinct units as they had been before the war, the colony's 'limited man-power and financial resources' dictated that 'the most efficient and economical solution is to combine the Naval and Military elements for all practicable purposes into one force – to be called the Hong Kong Defence Force'<sup>742</sup>. This would provide 'economies in overhead expenses for office accommodation, staff and recreational facilities'<sup>743</sup>. It was particularly stressed that the new force should not merely recruit and train a body of volunteers, but 'provide full social and recreational services', with such facilities being seen as integrally 'important to the spirit and efficiency of the Corps'<sup>744</sup>.

A Colony's conception of its obligation to the Volunteer must be enlarged to extend beyond mercenary rewards for services rendered... They must in addition be the Headquarters of the social, recreational and public spirited life of the youth of the Colony... providing a common meeting place where all ranks and those of different social groups can meet on equal terms... There was never any intention of using this as bait... I see in the provision of a reasonable Recreation and Welfare Wing in the new Headquarters an excellent opportunity of engendering and fostering that civic spirit which the Press is continually and rightly pointing out is one of

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<sup>741</sup> Idem.

<sup>742</sup> TNA, CO 537/4163, Copy of a Signal (KK 28/4) dated 5<sup>th</sup> April 1948 from the Commodore-in-Charge, Hong Kong, to the Commander-in-Chief, British Pacific Fleet, 'Future of the Hong Kong RNVR', p.1.

<sup>743</sup> TNA, CAB 21/2431, 'The Hong Kong Defence Force', p.2.

<sup>744</sup> TNA, CO 537/4163, Copy of a Signal (KK 28/4) dated 5<sup>th</sup> April 1948 from the Commodore-in-Charge, Hong Kong, to the Commander-in-Chief, British Pacific Fleet, 'Future of the Hong Kong RNVR', p.1.



the great needs in this colony... the Force as envisaged will provide that common ground for mutual service and understanding which is the only basis on which a community such as ours can hope to exist and prosper in the world as it is today.<sup>745</sup>

Thus, volunteerism continued to be depicted in terms of its wider benefit to society, and in this period, particularly its community-binding faculties in the face of internal divisions. An additional advantage it was hoped would be the traditional inter-service rivalry that Vernall feared, as 'by combining within one unit the principle users of man-power, cut-throat competition is eliminated, and a planned use of the man-power available becomes possible'<sup>746</sup>.

Concerned about the possible ramifications this might have for the efficiency of the unit, the Admiralty stressed that 'naval training must not repetition not however be swamped by military activities'<sup>747</sup>. In addition, to prevent the spread of any unwelcome precedents, unfavourable comparisons elsewhere in the Empire, and ensure inter-force operability, they insisted that despite this amalgamation, the 'Naval Wing should work on lines similar to any other local Colonial Naval force'. Implementing this at the local level, Commodore L.N. Brownfield, Royal Navy Commodore-in-Charge at Hong Kong, who feared a diminishment of his own authority, stated that he possessed 'considerable experience of the workings of the Straits Settlements RNVR both before and during the war and consider that we cannot do better than organise on the lines which were in force there'<sup>748</sup>. The guiding

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<sup>745</sup> PROHK, HKRS 212-1/5-7, 'Hong Kong Defence Force - Speech by Ride before Legislative Council on first reading of Defence Force Bill 1948', p.12.

<sup>746</sup> TNA, CAB 21/2431, 'The Hong Kong Defence Force', p.2.

<sup>747</sup> Ibid., 'Copy of a Signal (031658A/June) dated 3<sup>rd</sup> June, 1948 from the Admiralty to the Commodore-in-Charge Hong Kong'.

<sup>748</sup> PROHK, HKRS 304-8-32, Commodore L.N. Brownfield to Colonel L.T. Ride, 24 January 1950.

principle here was that 'their organisation placed the RNVR firmly under the wing of the Royal Navy'. Here Hong Kong and Admiralty interests diverged again, and the force was involved in a three-way tug-of-war, between Brownfield, Colonel L.T. Ride, Commandant of the Hong Kong Defence Force, the man responsible for its conception, and Commander Morahan, Vernall's successor as Commanding Officer of the HKRNVR. As Brownfield put it to Ride:

The present organisation for running the HKRNVR is unsatisfactory. As I see it, there appear to be three people attempting to run it, you, Morahan, and myself. This is bound to lead to confusion and difficulty... I am in favour of the Hong Kong RNVR becoming an off-shoot of its parent service the Royal Navy... There is nothing personal in my suggestions. I mention this as there has undoubtedly been some clash of personalities on a lower level. It is my opinion that I hold the machinery efficiently to look after the RNVR and by so doing might relieve you of an embarrassing child... I am sure that both of us have the same aim which is to produce a happy and efficient Volunteer Force.<sup>749</sup>

Brownfield simultaneously petitioned the Colonial Secretary in Hong Kong on this matter:

It is felt that the war and peace organisation must be the same. In war the Hong Kong RNVR becomes an integral part of the Royal Navy and it is felt that, for them efficiently to play their part, they must be closely integrated with the Royal Navy in peace. The existing regulations state "...the Naval Force when serving in the Colony shall be under the orders

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<sup>749</sup> Idem.

of the Commodore, Hong Kong..." This seems both logical and desirable, and, if accepted, the obvious outcome should be that the Commodore is responsible to the Governor for all matters concerning the Naval Force.

This is a responsibility I am most willing to assume.<sup>750</sup>

Morahan also favoured a closer association with the Royal Navy over the new Defence Force that it technically fell under, to the degree where Ride felt that the HKRNVR CO was publically 'making things difficult again' for him, and had to himself approach Governor Grantham to force Monahan to fall in line. At the annual Review Morahan had objected to the Defence Force Sergeant Major marching in front of his Colour Party, and thus conveying an impression that the naval unit was led by their traditional rivals the Volunteers Corps. This was only overcome by increasing the distance between Sergeant Major Jones and the HKRNVR so that they appeared separate<sup>751</sup>. When arrangements were made for the Queen's Birthday Parade, Morahan raised the issue again, arguing that 'as Parade Commander he does not require the presence of an Adjutant or R.S.M. [Regiment Sergeant Major]'. Ride responded that 'the composition of the Detachment representing the RHKDF is my responsibility, and that the R.S.M. (Mr Jones) is to parade and will parade in his proper place', causing Morahan to air his grievance in another letter to Colonel Vaughan:

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<sup>750</sup> PROHK, HKRS 304-8-32, L.N. Brownfield to The Colonial Secretary, Hong Kong. No. H.K. 33/4, 23 January 1950.

<sup>751</sup> Ibid., Commandant [Ride] to Sir Alexander Grantham, 18 April 1953,.

The 'Combined Forces' nature of the detachment is adequately shown by the fact that the HKRNVR and the Regiment are marching in the rear of the RAF instead of their proper place in the rear of their parent service.<sup>752</sup>

Ride contended that Morahan was 'entirely incorrect' in his belief here, and that 'the HKRNVR is a part of the RHKDF and its proper place is with the Force and not with its parent service', adding that 'it is part of the same old plan of Morahan to dissociate the HKRNVR as much as possible from HK Forces'. Under pressure from the Governor, Morahan said 'he had been misrepresented', which Ride derided: 'If Commander Morahan does not mean what he writes in letter, he should not write them and waste his own and other people's time', adding that 'at RHKDF HQ we never have this type of trouble with either the Auxiliary Air Force or the H.K. Regiment, nor do we have this trouble with the HKRNVR when Commander Morahan is not in command'<sup>753</sup>. This sentiment was re-emphasised in a Working Party interim report for the reorganisation of the RHKDF:

The HQ of the Hong Kong Defence Force which has exercised administrative control over all three services within the Force, has proved its value to the Army and the Royal Air Force... The RNVR, on the other hand, report that the intervention of a HQ has prejudiced their efficiency; they consider that it has had a retrograde effect on the work both of the HQ and of the Naval Squadron.<sup>754</sup>

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<sup>752</sup> Idem.

<sup>753</sup> Idem.

<sup>754</sup> PROHK, HKRS 304-8-32, 'Recommendations By A Working Party Convened to Examine the Reorganisation of the HK Defence Force' - Interim Report, 28 July 1950, p.3.

The main reasons for the 'divergence of opinion' between the Services was attributed to three factors: (a) in time of war the RNVR would operate under the direct command of the Commodore in Charge Hong Kong, therefore, it was 'considered that administration, as well as command, should be vested in the Royal Navy, and not in an inter-Service Defence Force HQ', and in HMS *Tamar* an appropriate facility already existed; (b) both the Army and RAF had produced Regular Officers to facilitate co-operation, while the Admiralty had not yet filled this position; and (c) 'personalities involved have not overcome their differences and have allowed them to interfere with Service efficiency'.<sup>755</sup>

Of course, point (a)'s assumption regarding *Tamar* overlooks the fact that during the Second World War, priority was given to the Royal Navy for resources, stifling HKRNVR operations<sup>756</sup>. After discussion by the Working Party, which produced a 'complete divergence of views concerning the Naval Force, with strong arguments being put forward on both sides', it was decided that the only solution was to 'find that good old British answer, the suitable compromise': that the HKRNVR would remain part of the HK Defence Force in name, but would be run to 'a considerably larger extent by the Commodore in charge' with 'only certain reserve subjects...laid down and dealt with through the Commandant'. This would 'meet all the requirements of the RN without involving a lot of new legislature and public split' and would enable the force to continue sharing the 'Messes and canteens, sports gatherings and social evenings, shooting matches etc., which it is considered form an important part of volunteering in the Colony'<sup>757</sup>. Sport in particular was seen to play

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<sup>755</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>756</sup> TNA, CO 537/4163, Memorandum on points raised in letter HK 33/1 of 13<sup>th</sup> July, 1948 from Commodore-in-Charge to Colonial Secretary, Hong Kong.

<sup>757</sup> *Idem.*

an important role, both symbolically and practically, in reinforcing the RHKDF's authority and the HKRNVR's association with the organisation, it being deemed that 'in this case the Defence Force shall have first call on all members of the HKRNVR to represent the Command in all competitions and sports', and not the Royal Navy<sup>758</sup>.

The Commodore-in-Charge believed it 'essential', bearing in mind the inferior status and treatment afforded the HKRNVR during the previous conflict and haemorrhaging of personnel to the senior service, that 'although the force will form a part of the unified Defence Force, it should nevertheless be able to feel itself just as much a part of the Navy... there should be no suggestion in any quarter that the local naval force is a "poor relation"'<sup>759</sup>. Despite the Commodore's call, however, the new HKRNVR experienced 'difficulties in the purchase of stores and supplies from the Royal Navy and in reconciliation of Naval Methods with those of local Government'<sup>760</sup>, partly on account of lacking a permanent Supply Officer due to the restrictions on manpower.

## **Racial Grouping**

In his speech to the Legislative Council, Ride 'made the point that the new Force is designed to eliminate all racial discrimination without losing the advantages of racial grouping':

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<sup>758</sup> PROHK, HKRS 304-8-32, Letter from L.N. Brownfield, Commodore to H.E. The General Officer Commanding-in-chief, 8 August 1950.

<sup>759</sup> TNA, CO 537/4163, Memorandum on points raised in letter HK 33/1 of 13<sup>th</sup> July, 1948 from Commodore-in-Charge to Colonial Secretary, Hong Kong.

<sup>760</sup> PROHK, HKRS 6-1-1695, 'HK RNVR 1950-51', W.G. Willcock, Lt.Cmdr. RN, CO, HKRNVR, 20 June 1951, p.3.

If we draft men into the Companies on the old racial basis we are quite liable to have one company only 30 or 40 strong, and another over 200 strong, a state of affairs impossible in any modern army... The only claim to promotion in the new Force is to be competence... the future officers will be officers of the Force and not of any one group, and as such they will be competent to hold any post of their rank.<sup>761</sup>

This presented a 'problem of officering' that was 'causing a certain amount of uneasiness' amongst some of the men resistant to the prospect of 'one racial group being commanded by an officer of another group'<sup>762</sup>.

Despite Ride's public assertions regarding the meritocratic nature of the new Defence Force, it had been decided that 'racial grouping – though not racial discrimination – will be maintained to a limited extent'<sup>763</sup>. Furthermore, the new policy applied primarily to the Hong Kong Regiment, and was not considered suitable for the naval force, where it was advocated that racial segregation should be preserved:

It is inevitable that in the narrow confines of a ship there must be some form of racial division unless the Asiatic is educated to European standards in certain respects. The galley and sanitary arrangements for a mixed European and Asiatic ship's company may well render

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<sup>761</sup> PROHK, HKRS 212-1/5-7, 'Hong Kong Defence Force - Speech by Ride before Legislative Council on first reading of Defence Force Bill 1948', pp.4-6.

<sup>762</sup> Idem.

<sup>763</sup> TNA, CAB 21/2431, 'The Hong Kong Defence Force', p.3.

impracticable the mixed manning of a ship. It is essential that recruits be drawn from the better educated type of Asiatic.<sup>764</sup>

This was not simply a case of racial prejudice, as a higher technological skill-level was required to operate a naval vessel as opposed to a field rifle in the Volunteers Corps. But in practice it acted as racial disbarment because of the generally lower standard of education afforded the Chinese community in the colony which meant those skills were harder for them the opportunity to acquire. Further racial division was advocated in the naval branch come mobilisation, in which case it was stated that 'all the personnel and dependents of European officers and men shall become the sole responsibility of the Royal Navy' with 'the welfare of the dependents of Asiatics to remain a Colonial responsibility'<sup>765</sup>. Nor was this a clear split along rank lines. Along with the British there were Australian, New Zealander, and South African officers who fell into the former category, with Indian and Ceylonese officers in the latter<sup>766</sup>. In the non-commissioned ranks were British and Portuguese ratings alongside Chinese. With such an arrangement for mobilisation, it is understandable why European members of the HKRNVR such as Morahan, felt that ultimately their allegiance rested with their parent service, and not the new Defence Force. On a practical level at least, it was commented by the HKRNVR CO that 'there is much give and take between groups and races – and there is keen interest in promotion in all branches'<sup>767</sup>. Yet despite such 'enthusiasm engendered by the successful Camp and Sea Training period', the HKRNVR's 'chief problem

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<sup>764</sup> Ibid., p.4.

<sup>765</sup> PROHK, HKRS 304-8-32, Letter from L.N. Brownfield, Commodore to H.E. The General Officer Commanding-in-chief, 8 August 1950.

<sup>766</sup> PROHK, HKRS 303-8-2, Analysis by Unit and Place of Birth of Persons Attested up to 20 December 1949.

<sup>767</sup> PROHK, HKRS 6-1-1695, 'HK RNVR 1950-51', W.G. Willcock, Lt.Cmdr. RN, CO, HKRNVR, 20 June 1951, p.4.



throughout [1950-1951] has been a lack of continuity in attendance. Particularly do those Volunteers who work in Banks find it difficult to get away from their work.<sup>768</sup>

One way of alleviating the personnel problems, was to incorporate a group formerly excluded from service in the local naval force. Rather than widening racial participation, it was deemed more desirable to integrate woman from the European community into the support branches of the force, thus freeing up the limited male personnel for more front-line roles. Ironically, this was a microcosm of the Admiralty's own strategy for relieving Royal Navy regulars for more strategically imperative theatres, and illustrates not only the successful hegemonic dissemination of British naval doctrine, but also the notion of social hierarchy that it institutionalised. These women were formed under the auspice of a local Women's Royal Naval Service (WRENS) unit:

The Wrens are being trained in Secretariat, Meteorological, and Supply duties and a Plotting team is about to start. Their attendance is always very high...Occasionally the ladies go out for a day in the MFV and they attend all Ceremonial Parades. They also attended occasional lectures.<sup>769</sup>

Command of this unit was given to Mrs Pamela Mary Butler, a qualified first-class stenographer secretary and the wife of a naval officer, thus giving her 'a knowledge of Naval matters which is so essential in this post'<sup>770</sup>. In addition, a Cadet Force was

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<sup>768</sup> Ibid., p.3.

<sup>769</sup> Idem.

<sup>770</sup> PROHK, HKRS 303-8-2, To Hon. Colonial Secretary via Commandant, HKDF from B.J.B. Morahan, Commander, CO, HKRNVR, 31 March 1950.

established to give basic military training, to 'bring together boys and girls of all nationalities', and to provide cadets with a healthy and useful interest.<sup>771</sup>

One concern raised by a number of prospective recruits, was if they joined the Defence Force, would they then be able to leave the colony and join the regular British forces, feeling 'I don't want to have to stay here training in Hong Kong during a war when I could be more usefully employed elsewhere'. This presented another conflict of interest between local and imperial interests, which recalled the drain of colonial manpower to the British regular forces that had occurred during the last war, and in particular the inability of the HKRNVR to recruit suitable replacements because the Royal Navy had already exhausted their prospective pools:

The specific answer to such a question is yes, he could, but not after an emergency was declared here; but the general answer is that this is Hong Kong's army, recruited from Hong Kong's citizens, to defend Hong Kong and paid for by Hong Kong's citizens, and the Force was therefore not designed to cater for such people. Each citizen of service age must make up his own mind whether he feels it is his duty to serve the Empire in general or his colony in particular. This Force is for those who wish to serve in defence of this Colony in particular.<sup>772</sup>

This issue of allegiance reflected deeper local concerns regarding Britain's continued ability and commitment to defending Hong Kong and preserving it as a British colony, having already surrendered it once and with the wave of decolonisation sweeping across the Empire. Prospective volunteers found

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<sup>771</sup> PROHK, HKRS 305-8-45, Draft Regulations, Second Schedule, p.2.

<sup>772</sup> PROHK, HKRS 212-1/5-7, 'Hong Kong Defence Force - Speech by Ride before Legislative Council on first reading of Defence Force Bill 1948', p.9.

themselves asking the question, "What is the good of all this unless we know it is the policy of His Majesty's Government to hold Hong Kong?" This was addressed in the House of Commons by Mr. Mayhew, Under Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, in response to Winston Churchill, and conveyed to the Hong Kong public:

It is the intention of His Majesty's Government to maintain their position in Hong Kong. We entirely appreciate the importance of Hong Kong as described by the Honourable Gentleman. Indeed, we feel in this particularly troubled situation the value and the importance of Hong Kong as a centre of stability will be greater than ever"<sup>773</sup>.

Another question continuously asked of Ride and the Defence Force in the correspondence columns of the Hong Kong press was "against whom are we being asked to defend the Colony?":

We shall defend the Colony against all comers; this Force is not designed to be directed against any one in particular not to resist any one possible aggressor... Any one will therefore search in vain, if he looks to the organisation of the Force for a clue as to the identity of Hong Kong's most probable public enemy no.1.<sup>774</sup>

Yet despite this public reticence, the prospective 'public enemy no.1' was very clearly China, as it had influenced discussion regarding the organisation and composition of the Defence Force from the outset.

In the Cold War context, however, it was not solely Communist infiltration from China that was feared. Again, the colony's transient, cosmopolitan nature

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<sup>773</sup> Ibid., pp.10-11.

<sup>774</sup> Ibid., p.10.

fuelled security concerns, with the Navy speculating that 'as the force will be international it must be considered highly probable that the Soviets will be able to introduce an agent among the ratings'. Consequently, it was 'proposed that instruction in A/S [anti-submarine] should be confined to officers'<sup>775</sup>, who by their nature were 'European':

Not only have the Communists overrun CHINA, but increasing Russian assistance is a menace to the safety of Hong Kong. The Chinese Peoples Government possess in Communism means by which they could ferment Internal Security problems within the Colony to an extent not possessed by previous Governments of CHINA.<sup>776</sup>

## Compulsory Service

In September 1949, the Commandant in a letter to the Colonial Secretariat commented that 'it is the excellent local [Chinese] response that provides another excuse for Europeans holding back, they fear that a Force with a large percentage of local volunteers will be unsafe to be in'<sup>777</sup>. Such fears were exacerbated by the move away from racial grouping, adopted more on political grounds. It was not simply a case of getting volunteers; they had to be 'reliable' volunteers. With insufficient numbers of European volunteering, it was decided in September 1951 to reintroduce

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<sup>775</sup> TNA, CO 537/4163, From Commander in Chief Far East Station to Admiralty, 18 December 1948.

<sup>776</sup> PROHK, HKRS 304-8-32, 'Recommendations By A Working Party Convened to Examine the Reorganisation of the HK Defence Force' - Interim Report, 28 July 1950, p.2.

<sup>777</sup> PROHK, HKRS 367-10-14, Memorandum No. 6 Manpower (Paper No. 2) Additional Reductions In Strength, 1959, pp.3-4.

compulsory service in the colony as a potential solution to this problem.<sup>778</sup> The racial proportion of Europeans to Non-Europeans in the RHKDF was fixed at 1:1, despite over 97 per cent of the general population being Chinese<sup>779</sup>, a ratio that became increasingly disproportionate as Chinese immigration rose. This was racial grouping of a sort. To compensate for this disparity, included in the European/Non-Chinese allocation were Indians, Pakistanis, Malays, Singhalese, as well as British, Old Dominion, Eurasians and Portuguese.<sup>780</sup> In fact, by factoring these groups into the 'European' category, the ratio is closer to 3:2 against the Chinese, as demonstrated in the following table:

**Table 6. RHKDF Membership by 'Races' (including HKRNVR), 31 December 1956**

Force	UK/Old Dominion	Others/Non- Chinese	Total Non- Chinese	Chinese	Total Strength
RHKDF	347	496	843	603	1,446
HKRNVR	85	13	98	96	194

Source: PROHK, HKRS 369-11-9, Manpower Statement of the Auxiliary Defence Services - Hong Kong: Male Membership by Races as at 31<sup>st</sup> December, 1956.

The flexibility of identity and in particular a desire to shed markers of 'otherness', perhaps to offset prejudices regarding allegiance, was demonstrated in many of the registration forms, where inaccurate or ambiguous data was entered under "race". A number of persons who declared themselves to be of British race were 'patently of some other racial origin, while others, including many of British race,

<sup>778</sup> PROHK, HKRS 367-10-14, 'The Royal Hong Kong Defence Force' by Lt.-Col. C.P. Vaughan, p.4.

<sup>779</sup> Fan, *The Population of Hong Kong*, pp.18.

<sup>780</sup> PROHK, HKRS 369-11-10, Report of a Working Part on the Reorganisation of the RHKDF, 1959.

merely described themselves as "European", "white", or "human".<sup>781</sup> The 1:1 ratio was fixed for the overall force, however, and within it the European manpower was 'very unequally distributed', and 'the proportion of British and Portuguese in the Hong Kong Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve and the Auxiliary Air Force is very much higher than that in the Hong Kong Regiment'.<sup>782</sup>

One factor behind this was that the HKRNVR was unique amongst the RHKDF's constituent elements in that it remained an all-volunteer unit while the others all incorporated compulsory servicemen. This was partly attributed to the unique appeal naval service had to those who possessed the 'call of the sea':

Certain units by their intrinsic nature are likely to attract more volunteers than others, namely the HKRNVR and HKAAF who will always attract personnel who are by nature interested in the sea or air.<sup>783</sup>

Yet, this positive slant was also balanced by Admiralty 'objections of principle to entering in the RNVR persons who are not genuine volunteers in the sense that they have not undertaken the normal peacetime obligations'<sup>784</sup>. It was agreed in principle that 'there must be good leadership and promotion prospects in any organisation for it to be successful', and that 'racial integration is a fact for ratings'. It was, however, considered 'impracticable... for officers due to security considerations'.

<sup>785</sup> A major factor was that, unlike the Hong Kong Regiment, which remained an entirely local force, the HKRNVR 'was liable to serve in any part of the world in the

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<sup>781</sup> PROHK, HKRS 369-11-8, From Dept. of Statistics to Colonial Sec., 10 February 1951.

<sup>782</sup> PROHK, HKRS 367-10-14, From Colonial Secretariat to Deputy Commandant, RHKDF, 18 September 1953.

<sup>783</sup> PROHK, HKRS 367-10-14, Memorandum No. 6 Manpower (Paper No. 2) Additional Reductions In Strength, 1959, pp.3-4.

<sup>784</sup> TNA, CO 537/6432, Commander-in-Chief, Far East Station, To Commodore Superintendent, Hong Kong, M. 02009/49, 8 March 1949.

<sup>785</sup> PROHK, HKRS 369-11-10, Questionnaire on the Effects of Voluntary Service, 3 January 1961.

event of hostilities<sup>786</sup>, with its men incorporated into the Royal Navy, thus the risk of incorporating subversive Chinese would become a far greater security threat to imperial defence than merely colonial defence, again demonstrating the Admiralty's relative priorities. Yet this restriction on the naval officer class conflicted with Colonel Ride's assertion that 'racial or social status can not be the grounds on which any differentiation in rank, pay or treatment is based'<sup>787</sup>. It also created operational difficulties, as not all the Chinese ratings spoke sufficient English. With no Chinese allowed in command positions, 'the language difficulty for English-speaking personnel in controlling Chinese ratings sometimes led to the European doing too much of the actual work instead of directing others to do the job.'<sup>788</sup>

The HKRNVR was able to take advantage of the relative unpopularity of the Regiment in attracting a greater portion of Europeans. This was due to the fact that if a European was called up to the Regiment, they could avoid service with that unit if they instead agreed to 'volunteer' for the HKRNVR. In one intake, of 34 UK-born men conscripted to the RHKDF, 'only 15 were enrolled in the Regiment; 19 objected to service and of that 19... six volunteered for the Hong Kong RNVR only to avoid conscription into the Hong Kong Regiment'.<sup>789</sup> It was deemed 'wishful thinking that should... the Hong Kong Regiment be put on the same basis as the HKRVNR, that they will receive that number of volunteers to enable that Unit to function'. For some 'volunteers', it was not so much the maritime appeal of the HKRNVR that pulled them

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<sup>786</sup> Ibid., Ratio of Chinese to Non-Chinese Manpower, 1961.

<sup>787</sup> Ibid., Extracts from a memo. by Brigadier L.T. Ride, 4 February 1948.

<sup>788</sup> PROHK, HKRS 41-2-343, Commodore A.R.L. Butler, RN, Report of Inspection HMS Cardingham and Etchingam, 14 July 1961.

<sup>789</sup> PROHK, HKRS 367-10-15, 'Compulsory Service Ordinance, 1951' Further to discussion, 14 April 1958, pp.1-3.

to the force, as an 'abhorrence of the physical effort involved' in military service which pushed them away from the Regiment.<sup>790</sup>

The technicality that such men were classed as 'volunteers' meant that if they failed to comply with training instruction they would be discharged as being 'unsuitable or inefficient', whereas in the Regiment they would be liable to prosecution, further encouraged 'those who would dodge the rigours of the HKR, applying for service in the HKRNVR even though such service does not appeal to them, for which they have no interest and in all probability would become seasick.'<sup>791</sup> It was, however, stressed that Hong Kong's nature as a naval base meant that the HKRNVR 'would always have a place in defence plans', and its maritime connection meant that 'there should be enough volunteers to fill 50% to 60% of the present small establishment even if there were no question of having to join another service if they did not volunteer for the RNVR'.<sup>792</sup> Yet, within a decade of this being written in 1957, the naval reserve would be disbanded.

The Chinese community were also treated differently in regards to compulsory service:

Because of the large numbers of British Chinese, their diverse quality and the desirability in some units of having a suitable balance between Chinese and Non-Chinese, it has been possible to be selective in compulsion of Chinese... it has always been the policy not to preserve

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<sup>790</sup> Ibid.

<sup>791</sup> Ibid.

<sup>792</sup> PROHK, HKRS 369-11-8, Memo. from V.F. Clarke, Assistant Director of Manpower to the Hon. Colonial Sec., 19 March 1957.



unduly with those who in one way or another fail to measure up, as it has always been possible to replace them.

This ran counter to both the post-war development discourse preached by colonial administrators, and the treatment of Europeans who would be prosecuted, while a Chinese 'who is quite capable of fulfilling his part is not only never prosecuted but is discarded and thus usually relieved of all responsibilities'. It was stated that it was 'not in the interests of Government or of the successful administration of compulsory service' for this to become public knowledge.<sup>793</sup>

Even though there were about 15,000 Chinese registered as British Subjects, several times more than the number utilised by the RHKDF, this was disproportionate to the number of Hong Kong-born Chinese males in the colony over 17 years of age, estimated between 300,000 and 600,000:

In other words only 2.5% to 5% of the Chinese British subjects in the Colony have registered as such... there are some who although Hong Kong born do not consider themselves as British Subjects, some who prefer not to register in case it should be held against them, some to avoid being conscripted and some who are illiterate.<sup>794</sup>

This reinforced the perception that the Chinese had questionable loyalty and allegiance should there be a case of internal unrest or external attack. Though like military service more generally, compulsory service had particularly negative associations rooted within Chinese culture that inhibited more from registering as

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<sup>793</sup> PROHK, HKRS 369-11-8, From Col. Secretariat to Deputy Commandant, RHKDF, 20 December 1958.

<sup>794</sup> PROHK, HKRS 369-11-9, From Assistant Director of Manpower, V.F. Clarke, to Hon. Colonial Secretary, 8 February 1957.

British subjects, and which colonial authorities struggled to overcome as they sought to convey more positive meaning through their propaganda:

The most appropriate Chinese words by which to render the difficult English expression "National Service" are shaú pei tuk, mo. The literal translation of these four words is "Defence Service" or "Defensive Service". I discussed this with the Hon. S.C.A. [Secretary for Chinese Affairs] and the three Chinese Members this morning and have also discussed it with the Political Adviser. Every other possible alternative appears to be ruled out by reason of undesirable word-association. It is important that the word "conscription" be avoided. Conscription as practiced in England, i.e., compulsory registration with exemption on grounds of conscientious objection etc., is a totally different thing from conscription in China which is a press gang affair coupled with the worst form of official corruption. Nevertheless, both are accurately described as "conscription". The Chinese words to avoid are CHING and KEUNG PIK as both of these have undesirable connotations... We must also find suitable translations for other defence terms. No satisfactory equivalent appears to exist for "Civil Defence", "Passive Air Defence", and so on.<sup>795</sup>

Yet at the same time, outspoken British citizens of Hong Kong also took a negative stand against compulsory service, viewing it as antithetical to 'we British who are so often lauding the benefits of Democracy with its freedom of speech and guarding of person rights'. Such discourse helped define British Hong Kong against

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<sup>795</sup> PROHK, HKRS 369-11-8, From Deputy Colonial Secretary to Public Relations Officer, 9 January 1951.

'the gentlemen across the border'<sup>796</sup>, and it was added that 'if we are going to preach democracy, let us practice it'<sup>797</sup>. The authorities realised that compulsory service would not be maintainable in the face of increasing public hostility once Britain abandoned it, and it ceased in the colony in March 1961.

## Riot and Unrest

Many of the reservations about integrating more Chinese into the RHKDF stemmed from fears regarding their loyalty in the face of fellow Chinese, either in the form of soldiers attacking from the mainland, or internal agitators and dissidents. Back in 1948 it had been suggested that 'Hong Kong is the sort of place where a volunteer is almost certain to be intimidated or got at in some way if there is a civil disturbance'<sup>798</sup>. Such a disturbance occurred on 10 October 1956, the anniversary of the 1911 October Revolution which brought down the Qing Dynasty, pro-Nationalists clashed with Communist supporters, leading to large-scale rioting lasting two days. Communist and anti-colonial groups presented 'a constant challenge to British rule and were quick to take advantage of any exploitative situations to undermine the credibility and image of British rule'<sup>799</sup>. Though the riot was not primarily a protest against British colonialism it did threaten its stability, and 'whenever expatriate

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<sup>796</sup> PROHK, HKRS 367-10-14, *South China Morning Post*, 26 August 1954.

<sup>797</sup> *Ibid.*, 2 September 1954.

<sup>798</sup> PROHK, HKRS 305-8-45, Lt. Commander George Reynolds to Office of the Commodore, 25 June 1948.

<sup>799</sup> Connie Lee Hong-nee, 'Society and policing in Hong Kong: a study of the 1956 riot', Ph.D. thesis (University of Hong Kong, 1995), pp.100-1.

officers were deployed to the scene, there were reports that they became the target of attack.<sup>800</sup>

The RHKDF was not deployed to assist the Police and the British Army in restoring law and order, attracting further public criticism and questioning why Hong Kong's citizens were wasting their time and taxes on a force that was not called out in a civil emergency<sup>801</sup>. Commandant Ride replied that 'the role which the Force has to play in a time of trouble is no longer to assist in maintaining internal security', and that it was 'primarily trained for an operational role in warfare, not for internal security duties'. He went on to argue that to call out the RHKDF would have been counter-productive, as 'the dislocation of the economic life of the Colony resulting from the disturbances and the curfew would have been considerably increased if members of the Force living on the Island had been withdrawn from their normal employment'<sup>802</sup>. Yet, four years earlier, a report by the Deputy Commandant stated that:

The object of the RHKDF may be taken as to raise, maintain, and train a local armed force in the Colony of Hong Kong to provide assistance to the Police Force in the event of internal security disorders, and to supplement the Regular Forces of the Crown in the event of War.<sup>803</sup>

This was reinforced in communication between Hong Kong cabinet members, highlighting the RHKDF's 'primary role, to assist the Regular Forces in maintenance of internal security', while fighting alongside regular military and naval forces in

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<sup>800</sup> Ibid., p.101.

<sup>801</sup> PROHK, HKRS 367-10-14, various cuttings from the *South China Morning Post*, October 1956.

<sup>802</sup> PROHK, HKRS 367-10-14, From E.B. Ride to Brigadier L.T. Ride, 31 October 1956.

<sup>803</sup> PROHK, HKRS 367-10-14, 'The Royal Hong Kong Defence Force' by Lt.-Col. C.P. Vaughan, p.5.

defence of the colony was only deemed its 'secondary role'.<sup>804</sup> Furthermore, it was stated that the RHKDF would reach 'a satisfactory stage of training' to take on Internal Security duties from May 1952, should the need arise. It was, however, expressed that:

Opinion amongst responsible officers of the Force is divided on the question of how the Chinese component would stand up to I.S. duties. Col. Bailey... is apprehensive. He assures me that the I.S. role is generally very unpopular in the rank and file of the Force and he is most anxious that we should not stress this role more than we have to.<sup>805</sup>

Following the riot, Commandant Ride privately 'hinted that the real reason the Regiment was not mobilized was that because it is predominantly Chinese, it could not be trusted', immediately adding 'obviously you can't mention this latter point'<sup>806</sup>. Ironically, a member of the public advocating the RHKDF's use as an 'Internal Security Force', argued that the fact that it contained 'many members who could speak fluent Chinese... would give them an enormous advantage over Regular Army units when dealing with unruly mobs.'<sup>807</sup> Therefore, fears within the establishment about Chinese reliability did not necessarily permeate into broader society.

Two years later, the Navy experienced unrest within its own ranks. On 4 September 1958, four ratings were tried for slackness in obeying orders. They were acquitted through lack of clear and sufficient evidence, but during the case, a Chinese senior Engineerroom Artificer from the same ship wilfully disobeyed an order

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<sup>804</sup> PROHK, HKRS 367-10-14, Note on Internal Security Role of RHKDF, To Hon. Colonial Secretary from Defence Secretary Claude Burgess, 5 April 1952, pp.1-2.

<sup>805</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>806</sup> PROHK, HKRS 367-10-14, From L.T. Ride to the Hon. E. B. David, Colonial Secretariat, Hong Kong, 30 October 1956.

<sup>807</sup> PROHK, HKRS 367-10-14, *South China Morning Post*, 22 October 1956.

to remain on board to go ashore to HMS *Tamar*, where he was subsequently placed under close arrest. This prompted an orderly demonstration by ratings in HMS *Tamar* who remained behind after work for three and a half hours. After they had been addressed about half went home, though another thirty made a further scene outside the main gate in front of left-wing reporters. On 10 September another rating refused to obey an order to join one of HM Ships of the local flotilla. He was charged with wilful disobedience and dismissed from the service. Those chiefly affected being engineroom ratings, a number of seamen and some communications ratings, and the 'immediate symptoms of the malaise' were a general 'reluctance to man the local flotilla'. The bigger issue was believed to be 'recent Chinese measures against fishermen and the intensive patrolling which the Navy had to put on to counter them. This meant more seetime which was one of the pretexts that the men advanced'. Behind this though, there was evidence to suggest that the political situation had resulted in 'intimidation and pressure on families':

I fear that the true explanation is more likely to be a reluctance to become too closely involved in action so clearly opposed to the Chinese Government's policy, aided and abetted by intimidation by left-wing union leaders. Many of the ratings are members of the left-wing Government Armed Forces and Hospital Workers Union. It is difficult to assess at this stage the seriousness of the trouble, or the extent to which it is being co-ordinated with the renewal of left-wing agitation in the Dockyard. It is

however clear that left-wing activity is involved, and it is also clear that the security of the local flotilla is distinctly threatened.<sup>808</sup>

It was therefore arranged to temporarily increase U.K. personnel in each minesweeper from 5 to 7, thus raising their complements from 17 to 19. The Colonial Officer stated that this was 'a disturbing state of affairs', and suggested that the Admiralty make plans for the replacement of the locally-enlisted personnel in the inshore minesweepers by British ratings, which it did<sup>809</sup>, under concern for the possible effects on British prestige vis-à-vis China:

These ships are British naval vessels, and as they are out-numbered by Chinese Communist vessels in the vicinity of Hong Kong it is vitally important that they operate at full efficiency. We would look silly if one of them was seized by a dissident crew and taken over to Communist China. We would also look silly if at a time of great stress it was found that they would not go to sea. The situation in Hong Kong, particularly the naval situation, at present looks to me to be rather dicey.<sup>810</sup>

A year later it was acknowledged that 'a sense of insecurity about their future' had made Chinese naval personnel 'a target for union agitation', and though 'triad penetration of Hong Kong Other Ranks has been substantially reduced by judicious weeding out', it was admitted that 'further attempts at infiltration are expected'<sup>811</sup>. Yet, the HKRNVR itself was seen to offer an outlet for combating the influence of such

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<sup>808</sup> TNA, CAB 21/2431, Items 21-22, From the Governor, Hong Kong, To the Secretary of State for the Colonies, 11 September 1958, pp.1-2.

<sup>809</sup> TNA, CAB 21/2431, Item 10, From the Secretary of State for the Colonies, To the Officer Administering the Government of Hong Kong, 14 October 1958.

<sup>810</sup> TNA, CAB 21/2431, Item 5, Minute by A. Campbell, Colonial Office, 24 September 1958.

<sup>811</sup> TNA, CAB 21/2431, Item 9, Extract from L.I.C. Monthly Intelligence Report, Hong Kong, October 1959.

undesirable elements within both the force, and society more broadly, with the Governor evoking earlier arguments made by both Elliot and Ride:

In Hong Kong there are, it is true, many undesirable influences which can induce young people to go wrong, but there are also very many opportunities for young men and women to join organisations, such as yours, which will not only give them useful training but will also offer them outlets for their surplus energies and their high spirits, and in a way moreover that is of real service to the community... your work and training in the RNR or WRNR [Women's Royal Naval Reserve] as the case may be is a form of public service of great use and value to the Colony... Hong Kong as a community depends greatly upon the sea and upon sea communications... Your ships form a valuable addition to what is otherwise available for the protection of Hong Kong's interests.<sup>812</sup>

## **Disbandment**

On 1<sup>st</sup> January, 1959 the title of the HKRNVR was changed to that of the Hong Kong Royal Naval Reserve (HKRNR), as the Admiralty incorporated all its remaining RNVR forces across the Empire into the RNR.<sup>813</sup> In the short term, this did not present much real change for the unit operationally; it still remained a part of the RHKDF; but by bringing the HKRNR closer in-line with the Royal Navy and its own

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<sup>812</sup> PROHK, HKRS 545-1-201-1, Hong Kong Government Information Services: Daily Info. Bulletin, Wednesday 18 November 1964, p.3.

<sup>813</sup> PROHK, HKRS 369-11-2, Progress Report by Defence Secretary (1 January - 31 March 1959), p.4.



RNR unit based in HMS *Tamar*, the HKRNR lost its local distinctiveness which would ultimately lead to its demise.

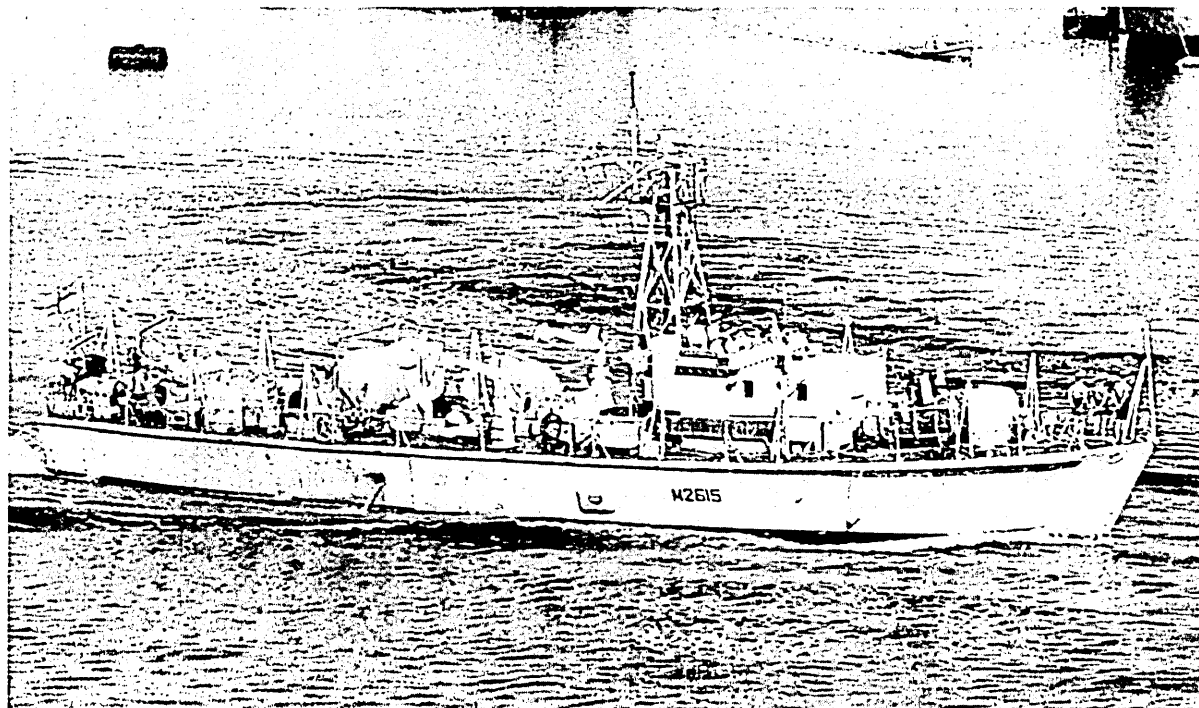


Image 20. HMS *Cardinham* [Source: <http://www.oldships.org.uk>]

Since 21 June 1959, the sole vessels operated by the HKRNR were two 'Ham'-class minesweepers, Her Majesty's Ships *Cardinham* (often incorrectly spelt *Cardingham*) and *Etchingham*, which had been supplied by the Admiralty on free loan, though the Hong Kong Government paid for all the maintenance and running costs of the two vessels.<sup>814</sup> Despite only having been launched in 1952 and 1957 respectively, both vessels were not built to handle the tropical conditions of East Asia which accelerated the corrosion of their aluminium-lined hulls, increasing the expense for the Hong Kong Government<sup>815</sup>. In late 1966 the issue came to a head with *Cardinham* requiring a major refit in order to continue in service. This came at a

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<sup>814</sup> PROHK, HKRS 70-3-323, 'Two Inshore Minesweepers for HKRNR: Commissioning Service on Sunday, 18 June 1959.

<sup>815</sup> PROHK, HKRS 70-3-323, Memo. for Executive Council: HKRNR, 29 November 1966.

time when debate was taking place regarding Hong Kong's defence contribution to Britain, and how it should represent 'something that is meaningful and of value under present conditions, not merely something which was meaningful at some point in the past'.<sup>816</sup> The HKRNR was singled out in this regard, for 'while it was considered important for the Colony to have some defence against mines when the vessels were acquired, this is not regarded as essential today', partly on account of the fact that the Royal Navy also operated its own minesweeping flotilla at Hong Kong. It was also noted that on only two occasions since the end of the Second World War had the colony valued a naval presence, and both times the HKRNR had been superfluous:

On the first, when Chinese gunboats were skirmishing with Hong Kong fishing vessels in the Pearl River Estuary [in 1952], we depended on a Royal Navy frigate to show the flag and when the seaborne influx of illegal immigrants developed in 1962 the minesweepers with their wooden frames and thin aluminium "skin" were found to be unsuitable for the job of putting boarding parties on to suspected "snakeboats".<sup>817</sup>

This operational ineffectiveness was compounded by their lack of use for internal security, notably demonstrated during the 1956 riots.

The HKRNR, at \$1.2 million a year, was already the most expensive part-time service in the colony in terms of cost per man, a warship inevitably being a more expensive piece of equipment than the light armaments the Regiment possessed. When the deteriorating condition of the minesweepers was discovered, representations were made to the British Government regarding their replacement.

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<sup>816</sup> PROHK, HKRS 70-3-323, *Hong Kong Star*, 10 December 1966.

<sup>817</sup> PROHK, HKRS 70-3-323, *South China Morning Post*, 9 December 1966.

The Secretary of State for the colonies replied, however, that the possibility of the HKRNR being disbanded was not considered a strong enough reason for giving another 'gift or loan'<sup>818</sup>. The geopolitical map had shifted dramatically in the intervening years. Cyprus, British Somaliland, Nigeria (1960), Sierra Leone, Tanganyika, British Cameroons (1961), Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, Uganda, Western Samoa (1962), Kenya, Zanzibar (1963), Zambia, Malawi, Malta, Gambia (1964), Botswana and Lesotho (1966) had all gained independence, and within a year Harold Wilson's Government would announce Britain's withdrawal 'East of Suez'. Large-scale decolonisation meant there was no longer a problem of imperial overstretch, thus removing the necessity of maintaining colonial naval reserves, and with Royal Navy vessels permanently on station in Hong Kong, the HKRNR was no longer considered worth subsidising from a metropole perspective.

During these negotiations, local investigations were made into finding a more relevant *raison d'être* for the modern HKRNR, such as 'a more realistic role in internal security or the prevention of illegal immigration'. Marine Defence against these threats was, however, primarily the responsibility of the Marine Police, and apart from the minesweepers, the majority of Government craft suitable for such purpose had already been earmarked for use by the Marine Police or their auxiliaries<sup>819</sup>. Thus, the capital expenditure required to replace the HKRNR minesweepers could not be justified for an internal security role, 'since expenditure of about \$3.5 million (the cost of two naval seaward defence vessels) would equally produce a pair of the new larger police sector launches'. It was regrettably concluded, therefore, that 'in the

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<sup>818</sup> PROHK, HKRS 70-3-323, Memo. for Executive Council: HKRNR, 29 November 1966.

<sup>819</sup> *Idem*

absence of support from the British Government towards their external role, the increasing expenditure on the HKRNR can no longer be justified.<sup>820</sup>

On Sunday 12 March 1967, a service was held at St. John's Cathedral to commemorate the HKRNR's decommissioning. It was remarked by Reverend A. Howison that 'in bringing their Ensign to the Cathedral the Reserve were laying before God their contribution to the cause of freedom, order and justice between men and nations'<sup>821</sup>. Thus, even at its wake, the connection between the Navy and liberty, depicted so strongly during the Second World War in the British Empire's self-identification and its strategies for colonial unity and mobilisation, was reaffirmed.

Yet, in 'training too closely with the Royal Navy and emphasising its British rather than Hong Kong connections', most notably during Commander Morahan's tenure as CO, the HKRNR had made 'a tactical error'<sup>822</sup>. It failed to evolve with the changing social landscape of the colony and the dramatic rise in immigration from the mainland, while its prejudiced aversion to Chinese manpower along with its determination to remain a 'Volunteer' force meant it existed to a large extent detached and aloof from emerging Hongkonger identity, preferring to draw closer to its British associations than engage in the nation-building project of the Hong Kong Government. Whereas the Hong Kong 'regiment was not one of the British Army's so the Hong Kong Government continued its funding', the HKRNR was ultimately considered expendable by both the British and the colonial governments, as it merely supplemented the strategic role already provided by the permanent Royal Navy units stationed there. This made it a prime and easy target for budget cuts at a time when

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<sup>820</sup> Idem.

<sup>821</sup> PROHK, HKRS 70-3-323, *South China Morning Post*, 13 March 1967.

<sup>822</sup> Commodore P.J. Melson, CBE, Royal Navy (ed.), *White Ensign - Red Dragon: The History of the Royal Navy in Hong Kong 1841-1997*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Hong Kong, 1997), p.113.

Hong Kong was already facing huge financial outlay on large civic projects such as highways, housing, industrialisation, tunnels and reservoirs demanded by its booming population.

It had been stressed from the outset of the force's reconstitution that 'the long term aim of any RNVR must be to attain such standard of proficiency in all aspects of Naval Life that they may take their place in the Royal Navy if required'<sup>823</sup>. Following the HKRNR's demise, its remaining members were incorporated into the Royal Navy's own RNR unit at Hong Kong, running a Naval Control of Shipping (NCS) unit.<sup>824</sup> Arguably, the force achieved its goal too well, and made itself irrelevant in the process.

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<sup>823</sup> PROHK, HKRS 41-2-296, HKRNVR 1949-50 - Report by B.J.B. Morahan, CO, 21 July 1950.

<sup>824</sup> Melson, *White Ensign - Red Dragon*, p.113.

## Conclusion

As with the other colonial naval forces examined, the HKRNVR was born out of and developed according to a mixture of local and metropole-driven influences, which themselves were shaped by a range of strategic, political, social, economic and cultural concerns. Though the Admiralty and Colonial Office back in the metropole 'encouraged' the colonies to play their part in imperial defence by forming naval volunteer forces, distance meant they struggled to overcome parochial interests and rivals for funding from the colonial budget, notably General Barret's Royal Hong Kong Regiment. This fostered prejudice, relating colonial inefficiency to *maskee*, and framing Chinese culture as undermining British moral values. Such negative preconceptions then influenced attitudes towards Chinese recruitment. The Admiralty were therefore dependent on men on the spot, such as Commodore Frank Elliot, to take their naval scheme forward by courting key civic and political figures, and drawing the public into 'active sympathy' with the Navy's aims through means of 'naval theatre'. Though Elliot was acting on orders from the Admiralty, he was also motivated by family honour and legacy. Thus, a mix of motives - imperial, local and personal - intersected to influence the force's development, and not always in its best interests.

A key justification for the naval force framed it within the discourse of the civilising mission and Empire development, emphasising the moral and social improvement that paternalist Royal Navy instruction could bring to the colony's Chinese population. Yet, there were limits to what it could achieve, and some more negative traits were seen to be intrinsically tied to Chinese character, notably

'transient' loyalty. Yet paradoxically, the British played an active role in fostering such fluid ties and allegiances, encouraging the economic migrancy required for Hong Kong to flourish as an entrepôt. Thus disloyalty, untrustworthiness, or unreliability, were not so much innate Chinese racial attributes, as depicted by colonial authorities, but more elements of ethnic identity created by cultural and economic circumstances.

During the Japanese invasion, although some Chinese remained loyal until the end, the fact that a significant number deserted reaffirmed British preconceptions about Chinese character. Yet, a number of factors behind the Chinese reaction were to a degree created by the British authorities, such as an absence of information, constant work with no shore leave to check on families who had not been billeted, poor rations, misguided orders to fire on Chinese junks, as well as more explicit racism from certain officers on the ground. A distinction should also be made between those Chinese ratings who had genuinely volunteered to serve in the HKRNVR, and those who were enlisted only because their merchant vessels had been requisitioned into the force, and whose allegiance as well as their training and discipline were thus more questionable, highlighting the problem of forming conclusions on a primarily racial basis.

The British authorities also displayed a lack of sympathy with the cultural stigma attached to military service by Confucianism, and the impact this had on Chinese attitudes towards the forces. They sought to address this upon their return to Hong Kong, following their humiliating defeat by the Japanese. There was a realisation that in order to re-establish British colonial authority and imperial 'prestige', they needed to regain 'face' in the eyes of the Chinese population. They refrained from applying western definitions of such concepts uniformly, and expressed a

greater appreciation of Chinese cultural nuances and the impact their actions and language could have on the community. A more egalitarian, collaborative relationship was fostered, though this masked imperial insecurities on their return, as it did elsewhere in the Empire. To achieve this, a stronger sense of 'Hongkonger' identity needed to be forged, to move away from parochial allegiances that had held the colony back in the past. Historical memory was utilised for this goal. A 'heroic myth' of Hong Kong's brave last stand emerged, emphasising a 'victor narrative' rather than one of British humiliation, and thus restoring prestige and face in the process. In addition, Admiral Chan Chak came to represent the new spirit of Anglo-Chinese cooperation and what could be achieved if they worked together.

Yet this discourse confronted more entrenched resistance within the ranks of the Defence Force, despite the conciliatory public rhetoric espoused by senior figures such as Brigadier Ride. Compulsory service was brought in, not so much because there were not enough potential volunteers for the defence force, but because the majority of such volunteers would be Chinese. Whereas previous doubts about the Chinese were focused around their perceived unreliability, flightiness, and lack of patriotism, such doubts grew into fears when the People's Republic of China emerged as the main threat to British colonial interests. Paradoxically, whereas before, the Hong Kong Chinese were cited as specifically lacking in a sense of patriotic duty because they had fled China following its invasion rather than staying and fighting the Japanese, the major argument for their continued sidelining within the Defence Force was that during a time of emergency, they could be a subversive element that would aid Communist insurgents. They had thus somehow acquired a sense of patriotism towards China in the intervening period. Such arguments were



clearly flawed and contradictory, influenced by underlying racial prejudices built upon collective paranoia regarding the 'European' community's numerical inferiority and Britain's precarious post-war imperial position.

Such fears were exacerbated by civil unrest, and insubordination within the naval force. The response of the HKRNVR was to further tighten its British connection with the Royal Navy, rather than try to engage more with the burgeoning Hongkongers disassociated from the force. Service insularity and local detachment meant that the HKRNR, as it became, failed to find contemporary relevance and adapt to the rapidly changing political, economic and strategic climate in the late 1950s and 1960s. Its identity became bound up in anachronistic sentimentality tied to past imperial glories, and not in keeping with the progressive spirit of the times. With neither a practical nor a political purpose, for either the Hong Kong Government or the metropole, the HKRNR ultimately became consumed by the very organisation that had given it birth.

## General Conclusion

'Imperial overstretch' is a contentious subject which has come under intense attack from a variety of historians adopting very different methodological and theoretical approaches. Economic historians have analysed the cost-benefit ratio of Empire to Britain to debate whether it was worth having despite increasing commitments, while cultural historians have argued that such calculations also fail to take into account the unquantifiable additional benefits derived from imperial power, such as status or 'prestige', which influenced international relations. Such challenges have spawned attempts to redefine the concept, such as 'strategic overextension'. Yet, the persistence of the original terminology emphasises the concept's fluid intangibility for both historians and political theorists. One problem is it has become divorced from its original context, being appropriated as a theoretical framework to apply to other imperial case studies for which it does not necessarily fit. For the British Empire, the issue was intrinsically bound up in imperial naval defence. The material strength of the Royal Navy and its ability to defend Britain's global interests was what preoccupied the rise of this discourse for contemporaries, most famously during Chamberlain's 'weary Titan' speech of 1902. If we reconsider 'imperial overstretch' within its naval context, as this thesis does in relation to the development of colonial naval recruitment, the concept maintains its integrity. The restrictions of the Washington Naval Treaty and the deteriorating geopolitical situation in the interwar years, particularly regarding Japan, meant that the Royal Navy simply no longer had the resources, both financially and in terms of personnel, to meet all of its global responsibilities. This was openly acknowledged by the Admiralty, who were

forced to put aside racially-prejudiced reservations regarding non-white colonial manpower, to appeal to Britain's dependencies to take on a local share of this burden.

As this thesis has shown, to achieve this desired outcome, collaboration was crucial. The Admiralty in the metropole could not create colonial naval forces on its own from afar. It needed 'men on the spot' to ascertain local conditions, forge alliances with key political and business figures, including the illegal variety in the form of Chinese secret societies, cajole obstructive elements - or their wives - court the press, and canvass the support of the general public from whom volunteers would ultimately have to be drawn. The success of its efforts in the Cayman Islands and Hong Kong, as discussed in case studies one and three, were heavily reliant on the dynamism of Commissioner Cardinall and Commodore Elliot, men who believed in both the service and the Empire, but were also concerned about their personal legacies. They recognised the need to bring the colonies into 'active sympathy' with the Navy, through a coordinated strategy of 'invented traditions', 'naval theatre' and public relations exercises, including in both instances the celebration of Trafalgar Day. In Trinidad, though the Admiralty had the support of local legislative members and oil industrialists, such groups were at odds with the demands of the working-class population that formed the basis of the emerging nationalist movement, and from whom they saw the force as protecting their interests and positions of colonial authority. The scheme thus never developed the same level of popular support on the island, meaning it had to turn elsewhere in the Caribbean to sustain itself.

Yet like the Admiralty, Cardinall and Elliot were approaching the issue from a position of imperial weakness instead of strength. This thesis demonstrates that

rather than the colonies acting as dependencies of the mother country, the Navy found itself dependent upon the local legislatures who held the purse strings and the power to either support or veto its scheme. Local interests thus superseded imperial ones in trying to sell the need for such a force to the public, through the economic, social and health benefits its existence would bring to the community. The diminishing influence of the metropole within colonial affairs corresponded with increasing uncertainty and concern over the future integrity of the Empire. Thus, though the MNF/RMN did see active service during the Malayan Emergency, as discussed in case study two, it was supplemented by a Royal Navy presence, and generally the colonial navies after the war acted as 'prestige forces', reconstituted more for political reasons than operational necessities. In both the Caribbean and Malaya, there was a fear that American cultural influence could undermine British imperial authority, while in Southeast Asia and Hong Kong the preoccupation was with the PRC, and potential Chinese subversives from within the colonies.

As in the case of martial race theory, there existed no definitive ethno-cultural framework defining a 'seafaring race' for colonial naval recruiters. This thesis has shown how such conceptions varied between regions and evolved according to local conditions and imperial requirements. 'Seafaring race' theory was but one of several pseudo-scientific racial ideologies utilised over the forerunning century to reaffirm British racial primacy and legitimise their imperial authority. It interacted with Orientalist discourse to reinforce the notion of the colonial 'other' by perpetuating concepts such as *maskee*, *latah*, and 'face'. Within the context of the armed forces, this implicit hegemony played an additional role in enforcing discipline and preserving the chain of command. Seafaring race theory provided a convenient

excuse to sideline those groups seen as potentially disruptive influences to this ordering and British authority, such as Chinese leftists in Singapore, and the Orang Laut in Malaya. It served to divide and rule, such as in Malaya, where maritime heritage and ethnicity were manipulated to buttress colonial collaborators, leaving a post-colonial cultural legacy where *Melayu* ruling elites were able to supplant British racial primacy with that of their own. In the Caribbean too, Caymanians were afforded favoured status, officially on account of their seafaring qualities, though this masked the fact they were considered more reliable on account of their skin colour and ethnic heritage than the more African-descended West Indians who had expressed anti-colonial nationalistic sentiments. Such ethnic divisions cultivated within the forces inhibited the growth of greater group identification, such as a shared sense of 'West-Indianness', and esprit de corps, bringing inequalities into sharper focus and resulting in discontent and protest. Where no alternative groups of manpower were available, such as in Hong Kong, the innate prejudices that this imperial ideology helped foster towards the Chinese population fuelled distrust within the ranks which undermined force cohesion and discipline when subjected to wartime duress. Ultimately, for British colonial and naval authorities, the perceived imperial loyalty of their naval recruits was considered much more important than any actual seafaring ability they may have possessed, inherent or otherwise.

This thesis has thus demonstrated how, despite the relatively small numerical size of British colonial naval forces, they can tell us a significant amount about the imperial system they were born out of, how it reacted to a combination of internal and external pressures and reinforced its authority on both a practical and ideological level, and the impact and legacy it has had upon the politics, cultures and

societies it sought to dominate. In the process, it has furthered developments within the 'new naval history', by reconceptualising our understanding of navies as not merely organisations for the physical projection and maintenance of political and economic influence, but as human and cultural institutions, in which power was expressed as much in the ideas and relations they cultivated, as the barrels of their guns. This thesis offers future research opportunities by providing a framework to analyse the other British colonial naval forces not explored within these case studies, by allowing for a comparison of experiences between colonial naval forces and their military counterparts, or for comparing the British case with that of other colonial empires.

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