

Who are those B****g O** F**ts?

Ralph Howard-Williams

A raft of young officers under training at Lymptstone since the 1950s to the present date would have asked that question sometime during their training. These BOFs would have been seen in the Mess bar on a Tuesday evening each month except in high summer. The questioner would have been told by older and wiser young officers that they are members of the Exeter Flotilla. I am certainly guilty of having posed that question. Now I find I is one! Yes, I am member of the Exeter Flotilla.

So what is the Exeter Flotilla? Well the Flotilla has its roots in a decision by the Admiralty to form a Naval Reserve. This was done in 1936 as war loomed on the horizon. The Admiralty decided it needed to know the whereabouts of men who could be called for service at sea at short notice. Thus was formed the Royal Naval Volunteer Supplementary Reserve (RNVSR). It encouraged "Gentlemen with an interest in yachting and similar pursuits" and happy to be executive officers in the event of war to sign up. There would be no rank, no uniform, no pay and no training. It will surprise no one that the Admiralty took this penny pinching attitude to those happy to be called up. The volunteers, on the other hand, decided that it would make eminent sense to get together. This would enable them to get to know each other, to bond and even, perhaps, to do some form of training, using the various skills available within the band of volunteers. A number of groups around the Country formed what became known as Flotillas. Exeter was one of those, and based itself, obviously, on the River Exe. Thus was born the Exeter Flotilla. When war did come, as expected, most of the members of the Exeter Flotilla did indeed join the RN. The Flotilla did not operate during the war and no records were kept during that time so we have no exact figures for the numbers involved.

After the war, in 1946, the Admiralty reconstituted the Admiral Commanding Reserves (ACR). The members of the (former) Flotilla were now battle experienced rather than the "Gentlemen with interest in yachting". The Flotilla was reformed and came under the auspices of the ACR. In the early 1950s, the ACR arranged training for the Flotilla based on Lymptstone camp. The camp was also asked to accept the retired Officers in the Flotilla as associate members of the Mess for its own social activities. As you now realise, the Flotilla still meets in the Mess.

That is a short history of the Flotilla, but what does it do now? Well the military need for the Flotilla has long since gone. It has become an association of retired Naval Officers. It also accepts Royal Marine Officers and the odd pongo, crab and even civvies! (We are not too fussy!) It continues to meet

each month between September and June for a meal (optional) and a talk. The talks are varied but usually have some form of maritime or defence related theme. The patron of the Flotilla is Commander Littoral Strike Group (COMLSG). Older readers will know this post as COMAW. So the Flotilla has a good link with the amphibious world. COMLSG usually addresses the Flotilla at least once a year giving an update on his group and the wider defence picture as it affects the RN. Other recent talks have included a talk on how British intelligence responded to the Taliban/ISIS threat post 9/11 and one by the Captain of HMS CONQUEROR during the Falklands War. Both were certainly talks very few have been privileged to hear.

The Flotilla holds a spring Lunch in the Mess each April and a formal dinner each November. One or two visits are arranged each year, again, usually, with a military theme. A recent such visit was to HMS DEFENDER, which has agreed a formal affiliation with the Flotilla. Prior to her, HMS EXETER was affiliated to the Flotilla. As HMS DEFENDER (and her class) has taken on the Air Defence role from the Type 42s, the affiliation was an obvious one. Finally the Flotilla has been organising a Trafalgar Day Service in Exeter Cathedral for the last 46 years. By doing these wider activities and seeking the support of such as our patron, we try to be more than a mere dining club.

As I said earlier, membership is open to Royal Marine Officers (serving and former!). For those still serving, it may not be an ideal connection. However, if you have retired in the West Country and seek some typical military comradeship and banter, along with the chance to hear some cracking talks, the Flotilla may be for you. If you had any links to the dark blue during your career, you may well find that you can reconstitute them amongst our members. Membership is not expensive nor onerous but does offer us the chance to enjoy the military style of life which civvy street does not understand nor provides. Why not have a monthly injection of what made your career different from the rest of the population? Please see our website (www.exeterflotilla.org.uk) for more information or contact me through the editor.

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