

# MAGIC GAMBIA



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These memoirs are of the twenty-one months I spent aboard H.M.S. Gambia an 8,000 ton 'Mauritius' class cruiser.

I joined Gambia in February 1957 at Rosyth, where she was undergoing an extensive refit. The following three months were spent preparing the ship for the commission.

The commissioning ceremony was on the 1st May 1957, and three days later we were at sea for trials. Having successfully completed these trials we were set the task of being ready for review by H.M. the Queen on 27th May. To some it may have seemed an almost impossible programme but as a senior officer once said, "Magic Gambia can do anything with Chief Magician Dunsterville (the Captain) leading her." Hence we got our nickname Magic Gambia which remained throughout the commission.

At the end of May we were one of two ships present in Cromarty Firth for the review of the Home Fleet by Her Majesty the Queen. At a concert given in the hangar of the aircraft-carrier H.M.S. Albion before the Queen, our skiffle group 'The Gambits' gave an excellent performance. It may be of interest to music lovers to know that a recording of 'The Gambits' was played over the B.B.C. Light Programme and over the European network including the Iron Curtain countries of Eastern Germany and Bulgaria. Their efforts were described in about six different languages.

After the review we paid some brief visits to southern ports before returning to Rosyth to prepare for our first foreign call. This was to Bergen in Norway which visited for a week in July.

One of the most popular trips was to the home of Edward Grieg who composed some of his best known works amid those serene surroundings. Also during our visit I organised a hike along the fjords to a village called Paradise, where we camped for the night. We can justly claim to have spent a night in Paradise. On our return to Rosyth after our first taste of 'foreign' we all enjoyed our long awaited summer leave.

Our next assignment after returning refreshed from our leave was a combined exercise with the U.S. Navy off the North of Scotland and in the Arctic. 'Strikeback' as it was known was organised by N.A.T.O. and mainly involved mock nuclear warfare.

On completion of this exercise we sailed for Chatham where a week's leave was given in which to say our fond farewells before sailing for the East Indies Station.

The last plaintive notes of the bugle died away at sunset 17th October 1957, as H.M.S. Gambia slipped quietly from her moorings at Chatham, and proceeded through the gathering dusk, between the misty mudbanks of the Medway to the Channel.

Although the general atmosphere which pervaded the ship that night one of sadness, as officers and men thought of their families and friends they would not see for another year, this was somewhat alleviated by the thoughts of spending the winter in the sun of the Indian Ocean rather than on the windswept quays of Rosyth.

For the next three days we headed down the Channel and across the Bay of Biscay passing down the coast, of Portugal close enough to see the mouth of the Tagus and the city of Lisbon.

On the morning of the 21st, Trafalgar Day, we actually passed through the very waters where the battle had taken place over one hundred and fifty years previously.

Later on the same day we entered Gibraltar in bright sunshine, very conscious of our white knees in unaccustomed shorts. Although we only stayed for a few hours to fuel, most of ship's company took the opportunity for a quick trip ashore, for some their first taste of going 'foreign' for others a chance to seek out old haunts. We left Gibraltar the same night, and headed East, across the Mediterranean under a star-encrusted sky. The next few days were idyllic - blue seas and brilliant sunshine, under which our pale bodies hardened and bronzed.

When we passed Malta we received our first batch of mail since leaving U.K. from a helicopter.

Late, on the evening of the 26th, we anchored for a short while off Port Said, and a few minutes after midnight, led a convoy of tankers and cargo vessels into the Suez Canal, the first large warship to do so since the crisis of the previous year. The actual country on either side of the Canal is mainly desert with a few isolated villages; at some points in the Canal it is possible to see for miles straight ahead and astern.

At midday, there was a very welcome pause for a swim in the Bitter Lakes and if you accidentally swallowed a mouthful of the water you realized the aptness of the name.

Towards evening we left the Canal and entered the Red Sea. During the passage through the Red Sea, we anchored off Kamaran Island for short time while the Captain called on the British Resident ashore.

On the morning of 31st October we entered Aden having completed the first five thousand miles of our voyage. During our three days stay we began preparations to become the Flagship of the East Indies Station.

Our next port of call was Bahrain where H.M.S. Ceylon awaited us, and where we took over the Flag of Commander-in-Chief East Indies from her. At 0800 on the 6th November we steamed into the anchorage off the Bahrain Petroleum Company's long oil-jetty and anchored near H.M.S. Ceylon, which sailed the next day for England.

Bahrain is the Navy's only 'home from home' in the Gulf and the Sheik is very pro-British. He has put the revenue he receives from the oil company to very good use.

One thing we particularly noticed was the exorbitant price of beer which certainly went a long way to encourage teetotalism.

After leaving Karachi we returned to Aden on 16th December where we had three weeks to spend and enjoy such pleasures as that rocky stronghold had to offer.

Christmas Day was a memorable one as aboard we had a Carol Service, various parties in the messes, and even our own nautical Santa.

With the temperature at 95 degrees what better place to finish up than on one of the sandy beaches ashore, which most of us did.

The New Year was also truly heralded by all the ships in harbour as they sounded their sirens and flashed searchlights.

Having got over our Yuletide celebrations we continued our cruise by calling at Berbera the principle port of British Somaliland, although it is no larger than a village.

Here, we became stevedores for the day by request of the Governor because the natives went strike, by refusing to unload s consignment of sugar from a merchant slip. Having completed this task we continued to Trincomalee in Ceylon.

Trincomalee is one of the world's largest natural harbor and for some years has been a British naval base although it is now closing down as such and being taken over by the Ceylon Government.

Whilst we were in Ceylon we had some leave and I took the opportunity to visit a tea plantation. It seems remarkable that the present tea bushes were planted over eighty years ago and are still producing excellent tea.

Compared with many ports we had visited but we were quite prepared to admit that the Hooghly River was the 'dirtiest river on earth'. During our visit the European community entertained us extremely well, the highlights being the Ship's concert party's performance and a very successful Ship's Dance.

Our next stop took us back to Ceylon where we went into dry-dock at Colombo to paint the ship's hull.

Colombo is a modern city and a very important port, being on the main shipping routes to the East. Also a centre of population where the subtle charm of the Orient is found side by side with the hustle, bustle, and amenities of a modern Western city.

After undocking during the forenoon of 3rd March we embarked the United Kingdom High Commissioner for Ceylon and sailed for the Maldiv Islands.

Those islands are situated South of India, four degrees North of the Equator, they are entirely of coral and present a typical tropical island setting.

The main island, Male, where we anchored has a sheltered harbour where numerous colourful dhows were anchored.

After our arrival the High Commissioner and the C-in-C went ashore to pay their calls. They were given very friendly reception by the Maldivians, who had decorated the large arch leading to the Sultan's Palace, with a huge 'Welcome' sign, and all the children from the schools had turned out to wave British and Maldivian flags and cheer them on their way.

A nearby building of interest was the imposing Taj Mahal Hotel, in fact this was actually built facing the wrong way! It is the rear of the hotel that faces the sun, a mistake in planning which resulted, I am told, in the

suicide of the architect.

Bombay is very interesting city and once again the European community arranged some excellent tours.

A short history of Aden may be of interest. It has for centuries been recognized as a leading trading centre; today its prosperity springs not only the trade of the surrounding territories but also from its unique position as a refueling base on the main shipping route to the East. However, it was not until 1836 that piratical activities in the area fired Britain to take over the protectorate. An expedition was dispatched from Bombay which bombarded and captured the port, and installed a naval Captain as the first British Resident.

Whilst we were there I arranged a week-end camp at Sheik Othman, a small village on the edge of the desert. We all thoroughly enjoyed ourselves apart from a few qualms over the snakes that seemed to slither around quite freely.

When we did eventually leave Aden it was for the even more barren port of Muscat. Prospects of a trip ashore were certainly not bright. Liquor forbidden.

The highlight of this visit was the Regatta against the crack Pakistan Navy crews. We eventually won the regatta although it was very closely contested.

In Karachi it was particularly noticeable how the black market flourished. We were continually pestered by illegal money-changers who offered exorbitant rates for Sterling.

Following our visit to Karachi we had a week at sea before we arrived at Trincomalee on 14<sup>th</sup> May. We were to be in this area for the following seven weeks taking part in 'Joint Exercises Trinomalee'. The first two weeks were quite pleasant as we were able to get ashore and experience the surrounding countryside. Unfortunately for the remainder we were confined to the dockyard area because of the state of emergency that then existed in Ceylon.

The exercises were for the combined fleets of India, Pakistan, Ceylon and our Far East and East Indies Fleets.

In the regatta we did very well by winning all eleven races, which quite some feat.

I think we were all rather glad to leave Trinco. Early in July and on the 7th July we crossed the Equator with true nautical ceremony, everyone thoroughly enjoying themselves!!

Our next stop was at Doigo Garcia [Diego Garcia], a small atoll four hundred miles south of the Equator. After a rather uneventful two day visit we sailed for Rodriguez, a volcanic island twelve hundred miles south of the Equator and the site of an important Cable & Wireless station.

Our visit was a great occasion for the islanders as was six years previous that they last saw a a large warship, and there was a seemingly inexhaustible supply of beer and local wines, in fact 50% of the local Male population seemed to be inebriated during the whole of our visit.

My personal memory of Rodriguez is of getting lost in a cave. We were being shown over some volcanic caves and had split up into smaller parties of three or four, our particular party being headed by two native bearers carrying hampers containing chicken, rolls and wine for our lunch. We were under the impression that they knew the caves well, but, when we came to a dead-end they explained in broken English that we were all lost. By this time our blazing torches were dimming, so we rapidly started to retrace our tracks and called the other party in which the guides were. Before we had gone very far our torches went completely out leaving us lost in the dark. The remainder of the party didn't notice our absence until they were out of the caves and lurching in the bright sunshine when it was found they were four sailors, two bearers and three hampers short. Realising that we had food they decided we could wait and calmly finished their lunch. Meanwhile we had found a ledge and were making the most of our food and wine, alongwith comments and noises from our two native bearers.

We mutually agreed at first, that Magic Gambia wouldn't sail without four of her sailors, but later reconsidered the situation and visualised the possibilities of being left on that delightful tropical island.

Our thoughts were soon disturbed by the sound of voices and then flickering torches as our comrades had kindly condescended to come and find their lost numbers.

When we did eventually emerge from the caves, after about three hours, the sight of the sun was very welcome. Afterwards we all agreed we'd enjoyed our adventure.

En route from Rodriguez to Mauritius we received THE SIGNAL, that, was to curtail our East African Cruise, farewell to the promised dreams of mad moments in Mauritius, siestas in the Seychelles, and the nightspots of Nairobi.

For me, unfortunately, it meant missing a week's leave from Mombasa to see a friend of mine who is working in Southern Rhodesia.

Our instruction was to take on about four hundred troops at Mombasa and sail for the Persian Gulf to stand-by during the Iraqi Revolt.

After taking on fuel at Mauritius we next arrived at Mombasa where all we were afforded was a quick look round as we sailed next day.

Prior to arriving at we had some very rough weather passing through the Socotra Straits and on arrival were greeted with a sandstorm.

A short later we completed the voyage to Bahrain where we were based for the month of August. During this period the coolest temperature was 91 degrees and the hottest 135 degrees.

The light relief during this period was provided by two Ship's concert party shows given in first-class, air-conditioned theatre at Awali, the oil company's luxury town.

Those shows, the last of the commission were each played before an audience of six hundred and fifty people, of whom one hundred and fifty were officers and men who had previously been wined and dined by the very hospitable

residents of Awali.

At the end of the month when H.M.S. Newfoundland relieved us it was, I think, a very welcome relief as by that time most of us were suffering by 'prickly heat'.

When on the 7th September we entered the Suez Canal and finally left the East Indies Station it was on the day that the one hundredth and last Commander-in-Chief hauled down his flag and the station ceased to exist.

Our journey through the Suez Canal was uneventful and as we left the Canal we noticed the remains of the De Lossop statue felled during the crisis there.

Our homeward journey was broken by a brief call at Malta, then we headed for Chatham, noticing more each day the coolness of the weather.

We arrived at Chatham on the 19th of September, all, I think glad to be back in England.

A week later the ship returned to her base, Rosyth in Scotland having completed another successful commission covering nearly forty-five thousand miles.

For me personally, our return meant the end of two very pleasant years National Service most of which was spent aboard H.M.S. Gambia; consequently it was with the feeling of leaving an old friend that on the 3rd October 1958, I finally crossed the gangway of Magic Gambia.