

LIFE ON OCEAN WEATHER SHIPS 1966-1969

The four ex-CASTLE class anti-submarine frigates of the Royal Navy replaced the same number of ex-FLOWER class corvettes in the role of Ocean Weather Ships (OWS) serving in the eastern Atlantic. Like the ex-FLOWERS, they were run by the UK Meteorological Office (Met O), part of the Air Ministry, then MOD(Air), and finally just MOD! They were the largest vessels owned by the Air Ministry et al, a rather big step up from the next level down – RAF High Speed Air/Sea Rescue launches.

The four ships were – OWS Weather Reporter, OWS Weather Adviser (not ‘Advisor’), OWS Weather Surveyor and OWS Weather Monitor. The ex RN Oakham Castle, Amberley Castle, Rushen Castle (complete with concrete keel (the state of the keel left a bit to be desired so it was ‘repaired’ with concrete, or so rumour had it. Whether it was the whole of the bottom or just a portion if it I do not know.)) and Pevensey Castle respectively. They had dark grey painted hulls and ‘Weather Ship’ orange superstructures. They stood out, they couldn’t be missed!! During my time they retained the triple barrel Squid forward of the bridge and the two bofors mounted on the amidships sponsons, one port and one starboard. All cocooned etc so that if the RN really got desperate the four ships could supposedly be returned to active service. Well, that was the theory anyway. ‘A’ turret was replaced by a large winch, all enclosed, for carrying out deep oceanographic sampling.

The OWS base was at Great Harbour(?) at Greenock with the ships themselves berthed in the James Watt Dock. For those who know the area, the sugar boats used to berth in the southeast corner of the dock, and the OWSs either on the north side of the knuckle or in the northeast corner – the ‘molasses’ berth. The water in the dock was not environmentally friendly, and if anyone fell into the dock it meant an automatic stomach pump out and numerous jabs at the nearest A&E!

Normally there was only one ship berthed at a time, occasionally two and very occasionally three, although I can only remember the latter happening once during my time.

The ships flew the Blue Ensign, defaced by the OWS Crest.

The purpose of the OWS was two-fold, firstly to collect weather information and secondly to provide a navigation beacon/services for aircraft crossing the Atlantic. They were expensive beasts to run and a very large amount of the funding for running the ships came from the International Civil Aviation Organisation.

At the time I was at sea there were 6 ‘Ocean Stations’ in the North Atlantic – Charlie, Alpha (A), India (I), Juliet (J), Kilo (K) and Mike:

Charlie was on the western side of the Atlantic and was manned by a US Coast Guard cutter.

Alpha was at 62N 33W and was manned by the UK, France, Netherlands and Norway in rotation.

India was at 59N 19W and was manned by the UK and the Netherlands in rotation.

Juliet was at 52.30N 20W and was manned by the UK and the Netherlands in rotation.

Kilo was at 47N 15W and was manned by the UK, France and the Netherlands in rotation.

Mike was in the Norwegian Sea and was manned by the Netherlands and Norway in rotation.

The Dutch had two OWS, the Cirrus and the Cumulus. The Cirrus was a modified merchant ship whilst the Cumulus was purpose built following the French design. The French had two purpose built ships, France 1 and 2. The Norwegians used two modified merchant ships – Polarfront 1 and 2.

Apart from the Cumulus, all the other ships have long gone to the breakers yards. The Cumulus was purchased by a Sheik and converted to a floating gin palace by Devonport Management Limited in 1997 and renamed 'Al Salem! As far as I am aware she is still chugging about the Gulf.

All Ocean Stations were a 200km square divided into 20 km squares if my memory serves me correctly, with the centre spot – more commonly known as 'middle for diddle' – at the positions above.

Time 'on station' was 28 days, with a 2/3 transit to and from India and Juliet and 4/5 transit to and from Alpha and Kilo. Leave after each trip for the Met O staff was from 10-21 days. The longest, 21 days, after an Alpha trip. If you were lucky, you sailed for an Alpha trip just before one month's pay went into your bank account and docked just after the next months got paid in, with three weeks to blow the lot on your return! However that was only for the young and single – i.e. the majority of the Met O staff!!

The pattern of trips was that two ships did I, I, J, A for two years and the other pair did I, J, A, K for two years before they swapped patterns. I was lucky as I started on the first pattern aboard the Weather Adviser from February to September 1966 before transferring to the Weather Reporter from November 1966 to July 1969 when I picked up the second pattern.

The crews were a mix of Met O staff, merchant navy and ex-RN personnel and numbered about 40-45 in total on each ship.

The 7 Met O staff were all volunteers and were detached from their normal shore Met O to the ships for a 12 month period, which could be extended if wished, and on completion returned to their normal duty station. The manning was Officer in Charge, two Supervisors, and 4 Scientific Assistants.

The radar and radio staffs were normally all ex-RN staff, although there were the very occasional 'outsiders' – e.g. Foreign & Commonwealth Office, ex-RAF. The Ships officers and crew were merchant navy, although one of the captains was ex-RN but

had got himself the appropriate merchant navy Masters ticket. The Captains and Chief Officers were mostly static with only a low turn over. The Second and Third Officers usually turned over fairly frequently. This was replicated on the engineering side. The nearest equivalent would be the RFA, but with a twist!

The pay of the ships crew wasn't that brilliant by merchant navy standards, but it did allow them to have a home life. Second and Third Officers usually came to OWS for a short period, 1, 2 or 3 trips, either to study for 'tickets' or to fill in between berths before returning to the merchant navy again. One Chief Officer used his time to study to become a Pilot for the Port of London Authority. So the low pay in comparison was accepted as the forfeit of knowing when the ship sailed/docked up to two years ahead, instead of the normal merchant navy practice of that time of 'Bye love, see me when you see me'. Basically it was 8 trips a year of about a month duration with roughly two weeks leave between each trip.

Messing followed the normal RN routine, Wardroom for the officers, PO's Mess for the Met, radio and radar staff, and the Seamen's Mess for the rest. Those residing in the Wardroom were allowed spirits and beer to drink, the rest had a choice of Export Guinness, McEwans or Tennents Lager – canned not bottled. However this was rationed to two cans per day!! It was all down to the vagaries of the Customs legislation as the ships, although leaving UK territorial waters, never docked anywhere else before returning to UK waters! The troops weren't considered responsible to be allowed spirits etc. However you had the daft situation of being allowed spirits if you were promoted to the Wardroom for a trip, before returning below decks again the next trip and not being considered responsible!

As it was in the days before satcoms, communication with the UK was by old fashioned morse key. No radio teleprinters, faxes, telephones etc, in those days. The radio receivers used were RCA 88's which very good sets, eagerly snapped up by amateurs when put up for sale on the open market. The main ships radar was a Model 277 with a circular dish, with a Marconi set as the navigating radar. The 277 was used for the upper air soundings and for providing aircraft with range and bearing from the ship.

One could always tell when the Queen Elizabeth was at sea criss-crossing the Atlantic as she had a very deep morse transmission when on 500Hz – commonly known as '5 ton' – due to the length of the aerials. Even I as a humble Met-man could recognise it.

Ships position was calculated in two ways – the original manner as in the days of yore, the sextant, or else using an old US Coast Guard 1944 Loran set. No Loran A, B C etc, this was the original, just plain Loran, housed in a 'black box'. To obtain your position it entailed counting the number of 'gates' at different settings and then transferring them to the chart. One didn't interrupt whoever was on watch at the time when they were working out the position so that they lost count of the number of 'gates' they had counted. Your ancestry was called into question in no uncertain terms as it meant starting from scratch again!! I understand that the RN referred to the 'gates' as 'blips', but to the Merchant Navy they were 'gates' and they needed to be counted, having been told on a few occasions by the OOW (normally the Mate (Chief Officer)) to 'do it yourself'.

A typical trip would be as follows. Half the Met staff would report back two days before sailing to start loading the Met stores with the other half reporting back the day before sailing. This was done alternately so no-one dipped out. The day before sailing was spent completing loading stores, loosening the caps of the 140 odd hydrogen cylinders around the balloon shed on the well deck at the stern, and generally getting ready for sea. Sailing and docking was always done in daylight. On leaving the James Watt Dock the ship proceeded to the 'oiler'. This was usually the refuelling depot in Loch Striven, however other depots were used on the odd occasion – the RFA Rowanol which was a small tanker tied up alongside the wall at Greenock, Rosneath or Campbeltown. The trip started and ended when the ship was abeam the Cloch Lighthouse at Gourock. Met observations started and ended when the ship was abeam of Paddy's Milestone – Ailsa Craig – at the mouth of the Clyde.

On passage 3 hourly surface observations were carried out by the Met staff – recording cloud amounts and type, surface wind speed and direction, sea level pressure, air temperature, visibility, sea state (i.e. the wind waves) height and period, and swell conditions, direction, height, period. These were coded up and transmitted to the Met O HQ at Bracknell. You knew when you had made it when you were able to spot opposing swells. Once west of 10West, the upper air programme kicked in with full soundings (temperature, pressure, humidity, wind speed and direction) at 0001 and 1200 GMT, and just wind finding soundings at 0600 and 1800 GMT.

Once over the continental shelf at 6 hourly intervals 'steaming' bathythermograph soundings were done using the 'Rocket' which went down to 450 feet. Known as the 'Rocket' as it looked like a missile. However one shallow sounding was done in the pit off Rathlin Island just off the north coast of Ulster. These soundings were done whilst the ship was underway and required a fair bit of skill driving the winch so that the Rocket didn't clout the block when winding in board.

This routine was maintained as you chugged west at the stately speed of about 8-10 knots. Although equipped with two boilers, only one was ever used. However I do remember one occasion when we were on Juliet and the Third Engineer was suspected of having meningitis and the second boiler came on stream as we thumped into Galway at about 12 – 13 knots. Luckily it was just a very nasty virus. But that was the only time I can remember both boilers being used.

On reaching the edge of the 'grid' mail was transferred to the home going ship and you became the 'on station' vessel. The aircraft radio navigation beacon was switched on. Speed was reduced to 3-4 knots as you steamed towards the centre. Normally the ship steamed a short distance upwind of the centre, stopped engines, hove to port side to the wind and to all extent and purposes sat there for next 28 days rolling nicely to the swell! With about 2000 fathoms between the keel and the pile of empty Guinness/McEwan/Tennent cans on the sea bed it was rather difficult to anchor!

As regards using a sea anchor I haven't got a clue why they weren't used, probably too much hassle!

Station keeping steaming depended on who was the Master and how far from the 'centre' you were. The Master of the Weather Reporter - Captain Norman Fraser -

didn't believe in 'comfort' steaming unless it was consistently gusting 40 knots or over which made life interesting!! Having said that he was a 'natural' seaman and could read the sea like a book. Amongst his time in the Merchant Navy he had spent a fair bit of time on the rescue tugs based in South Africa, probably Simonstown, during WW2. I can remember one very special occasion when I was on the bridge and witnessed him turn the ship around in at least a good Force 10 in waves of about 48 feet. The engineroom primed to give max revs when he rang the telegraph for full ahead, and the Bosun, another Scotsman from the Hebrides, on the wheel instructed to go hard a' starboard' when commanded. After studying the sea for some considerable time, and a quiet 'On the next one Angus', he just said 'Now' and slammed the telegraph to full ahead. She turned like a dream, smooth, and you didn't feel a thing!

For the Met staff the 'on station' routine changed to hourly observations, the full upper air sounding programme, but the 450 foot bathy soundings stopped and twice daily 900 foot soundings were done instead using the 'Bomb' – yup, you've already guessed that it was shaped like a bomb! In addition wind speed and direction was calculated at each upper air sounding at 1000ft levels from the surface to 45000 feet I think it was for passing to aircraft.

Whilst the rest of the ship worked the normal '4 on 8 off', the Met staff followed a version of the 'shore' routine. There was always one member of staff (Scientific Assistant) on duty for the hourly observations. The full soundings at 0001 and 1200 GMT required another 3 on duty (1 Supervisor and 2 Scientific Assistants). The wind only soundings at 0600 and 1800 only required one extra person, a Supervisor, who carried out the sounding with the help of the observing Scientific Assistant.

For the radio staff the 'on station' routine changed from one operator on duty to handle the Met traffic to two being on duty. One handling the Met traffic and any other admin traffic, whilst the second looked after the aircraft side. This entailed ensuring the navigation beacon was transmitting the correct call sign for the grid square the ship was wallowing in and passing details to any aircraft requesting information by VHF. This information was the ships position, wind speed and direction at the flight level the aircraft was at, and a radar fix – distance and bearing from the ship.

The radar staff tracked all upper air soundings and provided the range and bearing to the Met staff. They also provided the radar fixes to the aircraft. In between times they maintained/repared the Met, radio and radar equipment.

Once an aircraft started to call the ship, the DF equipment picked up the transmission and a blip appeared on the radar screen. On the Weather Reporter it was a matter of pride to the radar staff to supply the radio room with the aircraft's bearing and range before the pilot had finished asking for what he wanted! It must be remembered that this was in the days before GPS and satellite navigation.

The majority of the conversations between ship and aircraft were formal – 'Ocean Station India/Juliet/Alpha or Kilo, this is (aircraft call sign), request ship's position, radar fix and wind at flight level (whatever height the aircraft was flying at)'. There were the odd occasions when the pilots were quite chatty, realising that we were stuck

1000's of feet below them for about a month. If you were really lucky the pilot let one of the stewardesses make the call!! One BOAC (British Overseas Airline Corporation(?)) – pre British Airways - pilot on the Heathrow to Bermuda run was quite chatty and always had a few words if it wasn't busy and until he went out of range. One BOAC pilot made the mistake of asking what conditions were like, where upon one rather dry radio operator advised him 'not too bad really, slightly damp underfoot though'. There was a deathly hush after that!!

Likewise one of the Pan American (now no longer around) pilots on the Heathrow to New York run was 'human'. The call sign for the Pan-Am flights was 'Clipper' followed by the flight number. It was noticeable that Flight 001, regardless of the pilot, was always announced as 'This is THE Clipper 1'.

The odd time Qantas called it was always 'This is Qantas, the worlds airline, flight number etc'. Alitalia, the Italian state airline, always called up approaching the ship and when past the ship requesting a radar fix on each occasion. It didn't matter who the pilot was, they wanted two fixes. The radar operator was always ready for them the second time around and always had the information ready before the pilot had got past 'Ocean Station'!!

Light aircraft were reasonably frequent 'visitors' on their delivery flights to the UK or Europe. Without exception there was always something not working – VHF but no HF or vice versa, no heating, no DF and so it went on. I remember one occasion when we were on Juliet when we were requested by Shanwick Oceanic Control to keep the ships navigation beacon on continuously and to keep a continuous radar watch on from a certain time. An aircraft being ferried to Europe via the UK had taken off from Gander and lost his radio compass before he had even reached the US Coast Guard cutter manning Ocean Station Charlie. They had 'brought' him over the top of them using their radar, 'set' the radar beam in the direction of Juliet and guided the pilot as far as they could along the beam till out of range. We did likewise when he reached our part of the ocean, setting the beam in the direction of Shannon Airport in Ireland and guiding him along that until he passed out of range. In the meantime Shannon did the same when he got in range of them. He was lucky, he made it, crossing the Atlantic courtesy of three radars!

The Weather Ships had one other function, air sea rescue. Whilst on Kilo, the Weather Reporter was called upon to act in this capacity. Three light aircraft were flying together on a delivery trip from the States to Europe. They encountered electrical (thunder) storms and one lost contact with the other two. He also got zapped by lightning and lost the majority of his instrumentation. It was night, cloudy, and he didn't have a clue where he was or which direction he was flying in. Luckily a USAF aircraft on transit from Spain to the States picked up his distress calls. The USAF air sea rescue control centre at Lajes in the Azores scrambled a Hercules to rendezvous with the aircraft. After ascertaining how much fuel he had on board and the distance to the nearest land – Spain, he was advised that he wasn't going to make it and that he should ditch alongside us on Kilo. Needless to say he wasn't exactly jumping over the moon, even if he could've have seen it, at this suggestion. Anyway he ditched alongside, we picked him up, and a day or so later transferred him to a Royal Mail Ship for passage to the UK.

It was quite common not to see any ships apart from the ship you relieved and the ship relieving you until reaching the Clyde again. So any ship passing was a great event! I can remember the odd merchant ship, a Canadian anti-submarine frigate who got a trifle upset when we tried to raise him by radio as he wished to be incognito, a Russian 'RFA' waiting for a cruiser, 3 Russian destroyers, a Russian survey ship who was monitoring waves generated by depressions, and HMS Hecate – an RN survey vessel.

The Russian survey ship was a converted deep sea trawler which stayed around us for 3-4 days. We exchanged cinema films, but I think they were the outright winners as they lent us god knows how many reels of the Russian Revolution, dramatised version, and needless to say all in Russian!! They got the latest blockbuster and of course Bugs Bunny.

The greatest number of ships occurred one summer as part of an international oceanographic survey when we were on Juliet. There were survey ships up the ying-yang all carrying out an intense programme of bathy soundings. We had embarked a RN party of Survey Recorders to carry out the soundings as we wouldn't have been able to cope with doing that and the normal routine which still had to be adhered to. It was the only time that I saw a ship anchor in mid-Atlantic. The ship in question was an American survey vessel which had an enormous winch immediately in front of the bridge, the housing for which was the size of a house! We learnt that they broke the anchor cable on the foc'sle and then connected the winch cable to it before letting the anchor go – and they still had plenty of cable to spare! The UK Hydrographic Office had issued a 'Notice to Mariners' advising ships to stay clear of the area – that didn't work! We never saw so many ships that trip as anyone crossing the Atlantic in either direction had to come for a look. The best was a Swedish merchantman with a deck cargo of timber stacked to a great height, a slight list to port, chugging eastwards at about 8-10 knots right through the middle of the assembled ships, trailing a plume of black smoke and not a soul in sight!

Occasionally we saw the odd maritime reconnaissance aircraft – a US Navy P3 Orion or a RAF Shackleton. On one trip whilst on India we were visited by a Buccaneer from Lossiemouth which buzzed us a couple times before standing it on its tail and heading back home. It's quite good standing on the bridge wing with eyelevel about 40-45 feet above the water and looking down into the cockpit of a Shackleton as it thundered past! The only other time a Shackleton was seen was if the ship was at sea over Christmas when they dropped mail, goodies, newspapers and even the Christmas tree a few days before the big day.

For the Met staff there wasn't a lot of spare time during a trip because of the extensive programme to be carried out. If you weren't on watch, then you were sleeping or getting ready to go on watch! But there was still time for the Mess competitions – darts, whist, crib, bridge and of course Uckers!! There was a library on board, and even time to study. Whist was played most of the time regardless if it was as part of the Mess competition or not. Games usually started around the mid-morning 'smoko' and lasted well into the evening. Players changed as the watches changed. Film shows were run twice a week in each mess. And there was always the BBC World Service.

Although you knew what date it was, you lost track of what day it was. The only reason you knew it was Sunday was because of the tot of neaters issued in the forenoon and that it was always roast chicken for Sunday lunch!! Very occasionally the Cook threw everybody by serving roast chicken mid-week, and then you were totally confused!!

I've seen the North Atlantic in all its moods, from flat calm to standing in the wheelhouse and looking up to the crest of the waves. I've sailed through two 'official' hurricanes, the first of which was a trifle draughty to say the least! For the second one we were on India and the ship on Juliet took a hammering whilst we just managed a Gale Force 8! We felt a bit embarrassed when both ships received a 'well done' signal for maintaining the programme from the Director General of the Met O! However that was more than made up by the numerous occasions when we had to contend with the infamous 'deep Atlantic depression' of the BBC Shipping Forecast and no slaps on the back, except of cold water!

The CASTLE's were very good sea boats with the top of a Gale Force 8 and the bottom of a Severe Gale Force 9 being the worst times. At those times the wave length wasn't quite long enough and the ship would ride three before digging the nose in on the fourth!! This wasn't much of a problem unless you were filling a balloon for an upper air sounding in the open balloon shed on the back end. Deck level in dock being 5-6 feet above the water! Having dug her nose in, the stern then came out in sympathy and dug in as the bow lifted clear and shipped one over the gun'whales straight into the balloon shed. It is possible to go from a standing start to atop the hydrogen cylinders and grabbing hold of the fire sprinklers at about 8 feet above deck level in one swift movement!! All the Met staff very quickly developed a sixth sense when a wave was going to thump inboard and you didn't get caught out that often. If you did, then you knew it when a great solid lump of cold Atlantic water caught you between the shoulder blades!

Once the wind got well into a Force 9 and above, the wavelength was such that the ship remained dry. She might roll like a pig but at least it was a dry one! It did make life interesting when launching the 0001 or 1200 GMT upper air sounding, wondering if the equipment would clear the next wave crest before the balloon started to lift once clear of the ship.

As already mentioned, when 'on station' the ship lay port side to the wind. This ensured that the main entrance into the ship from the main deck was sheltered. Very, very occasionally the ship would do the reverse and be starboard side to the wind. I can remember one incident when one of the stewards came out onto the well deck to chuck the contents of the 'slop' bucket over the side, and yes, you've guessed right, he was on the starboard side which just happened to be the windward side! He realised this immediately that he started to swing the bucket, but it was too late. Brain failed to countermand instruction to arms in time, and the majority of the contents of the bucket came back to him. He not only suffered the pain of having to change and wash his clothes, have a shower to clean himself up, but he also had to wash the deck down as well!!

One final 'dit', as all that venture before the mast know, seamen are great practical jokers. Halfway through my first trip after changing ships as we wrapped up from the

midday upper air sounding, the duty Supervisor asked me to go down to the engineroom and ask for the 'long wait'. He had forgotten that I had already spent seven months at sea, a big mistake. I remained po-faced and duly presented myself to the Second Engineer for the 'long wait'. The conversation went along the lines of 'I've been sent down for the long wait, so and so has forgotten that this isn't my first trip to sea and as you have been saying come down for a guided tour, here I am'. For the next 45 minutes or so I had a great time clambering around first of all the boiler room, which only took a couple of minutes, and then learning the intricacies of the innermost workings of the triple expansion steam reciprocating engine in the engineroom itself. After about 45 minutes said Supervisor came to the engineroom entrance and yelled down and asked if everything was OK. Very po-faced again the reply was that it wasn't 'as some sod had knicked the 'wait' and we couldn't find it'. Twenty or so minutes later on completion of my guided tour I returned to the upper levels, feeling quite pleased with myself!

I hope the above gives you a small insight on what life was like aboard an Ocean Weather Ship. We always had great pleasure when meeting members of the 'Grey Funnel Line' of telling them that we stayed out there whilst they headed for the nearest harbour when bad weather was forecast.....

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