

CATERING IN THE R.F.A.

The first question a sailor will probably ask on joining a new ship is "What is the food like?" This pre-occupation is not unnatural in a life which can provoke hearty appetites, and no doubt sailors of all ages have tended to measure their sustenance in terms of "Mum's Cooking". We do not pretend, in the RFA Service, that we have yet reached this ideal state, but we are a very long way from hard tack and ship's biscuit.

The RFA has a particular interest in attracting, and keeping, men who are trained and proficient, and in sympathy with the specialised character of the Service. The standard of habitability and catering in our ships is one measure of our reputation, and it behoves us to be among the leaders in the field.

As in any other business, greater efficiency demands modern methods, labour saving machinery and the economical use of staff. Automation has therefore come to the ships galley. While we are limited, for economic reasons, in the amount which can be spent on older ships in this respect, later RFAs, and particularly those under construction, are being equipped with up-to-date machinery, electrically operated and thermostatically controlled, and finished in stainless steel. There are infra-red grills, capable of producing 250 to 300 grills per hour, fish fryers, slicing machines, food and dough mixers, chipping machines and pie machines. An "iron cow" reconstitutes milk powder, by a process of heating, emulsifying and refrigeration, to produce fresh milk at the rate of 20 gallons at one "milking".

It has been found that there is considerable benefit in operation to be derived from centralised messing of the crew. This constitutes a break with the traditional shipboard system of segregation into messes and leads logically to the cafeteria system. It already operates successfully in the TIDESPRING and TIDEPOOL and is planned for later ships. It requires still more equipment, hotpresses, cold cabinets for meats, salads and ice cream, plate dispensers and trays. Numerous accessories such as toasters, urns, coffee percolators and boilers are also provided, while dish washers and disposal units account for post-prandial chores. It is a "refreshing thought" that some ships bars are to be equipped with cooling facilities for draught beer.

Behind the scenes there must be adequate storage, dry and refrigerated, for foodstuffs, and suitable means of transporting food from the stores to the galley, and from there to the servery. This means the provision of service lifts, chutes and conveyors. All this represents a massive capital investment, whose repercussions extend to such matters as the production of sufficient electrical power and a sustained maintenance effort. The equipment, however, is merely part of the resources. It will not yield full benefit without intelligent use and good staff organisation.

Catering in the RFA Service is conducted under the auspices of the Catering Superintendent. He advises on equipment and purchasing, carries out inspections of ships' catering arrangements, and above all, is responsible for the selection and training of staff. In all these functions he works in consultation with the Management and Personnel Sections at Headquarters.

One of the more recent innovations has been the

appointment of Catering Officers to the larger ships. As head of the ship's catering department, their primary duties are the victualling of the ship, arrangement of menus within a budget and the tasteful presentation of food. They superintend the work of stewards, attend to the upkeep of the accommodation and compile the accounts. They are generally responsible to the Master for the control of their department. In smaller ships, and those vessels with Chinese crews, the RFA Service still has the traditional Chief Steward to assist the Master.

The staff comprise cooks, stewards, butcher, baker, etc., according to the size of the ships complement. The usual benefits of Company Service Contracts, including continuity of employment, higher pay and better leave, are available to these men, as for other RFA personnel. To enhance their professional ability, contract personnel are given training courses at RN Establishments, ranging from 3 to 4 weeks for Assistant Cooks and Stewards, to 6 to 8 weeks for Chief and Second Cooks and Stewards, and 13 weeks for the Catering Officer. As a result of these courses senior personnel are brought up to specific City and Guilds standards, and junior personnel to Ministry of Transport Cookery Certificate level.

These, then, are the men and their tools. What do they achieve?

The annual "housekeeping" bill for the RFA Service runs at about £350,000. For this, RFA personnel get three cooked meals per day, tea and coffee at the appropriate intervals, and additional snacks as necessary, for example a RAS Supper during night exercises. Provisions are purchased to a great extent from Service contractors, and in this respect the RFA has a distinct advantage in costs over other shipping companies. We find, however, that the RFA feeds at the same rate of cost as the leading companies, thus indicating that the advantage of cheaper buying is passed on to the ships in terms of more food and greater variety. The usual range of foodstuffs bought is adequate to provide a balanced and varied diet, plus additional luxuries according to the state of each ship's "purse".

For accounting purposes, foodstuffs are costed by means of token rates. These are flat rates which enable ships operating in an expensive area to feed theoretically at the same cost, and thus to the same standard, as others. The cost is assessed quarterly and the resulting accounts forwarded to Headquarters for scrutiny and, since considerable sums are at stake, a searching check.

The Master of each ship naturally has an overall responsibility for victualling activities, and to him occasionally falls the unwelcome task of explaining an overspending. This has been known to lead to some unwholesome correspondence, for example, as to whether the prawn is staple diet or a delicacy, or whether the appetite of well-built cadets is unreasonably healthy.

It is the hope for the future that the necessity for such recriminations will disappear. Given trained staff and good materials, the ships will have the potential to achieve a high standard of catering at reasonable cost. The rest is a matter of organisation, teamwork and interest in a subject close to everyone's heart.