

Manning the R.F.A. Service

The Director of Stores is responsible for the manning and operation of one of the largest British Merchant Navy Fleets—the Royal Fleet Auxiliary Service.

The R.F.A. Fleet at present consists of 13 Dry Cargo ships and 30 Tankers ranging from vessels of 700 to 14,000 tons gross, and to man it, 900 officers and 2,300 ratings are employed. By 1969, with the introduction of more and larger ships, 1,200 officers and 3,000 ratings will be required, and plans are already in hand to meet this additional commitment. Approximately 130 Deck and Engineer Apprentices are also carried, for training. In addition, the Royal Research Ship DISCOVERY is manned by R.F.A. Officers, and there are 15 R.F.A. Tugs and Salvage Vessels which are manned and operated separately by the Director General, Dockyards and Maintenance, although the pay, conditions, discipline and records of these personnel is the responsibility of Director of Stores.

Manning this Fleet presents a complex and ever-changing problem, complicated by the fact that the ratings are drawn from five nationalities—British, Maltese, Hong Kong Chinese, Singapore Chinese, and Seychellois, and R.F.A. ships sail to almost all parts of the world, often off recognised shipping routes, several ships being based permanently on the Far East Station. There is, therefore, a considerable amount of air traffic to be arranged—from the movement of an individual officer or rating, to complete crews of up to 80 men.

Being Merchant Ships, R.F.A.'s must sail under Ministry of Transport Agreements, and must obey Ministry regulations regarding minimum approved complements and lifesaving equipment, etc. For example, in addition to the certificated Navigating and Engineer Officers required, every foreign-going ship must carry a certificated cook, and ships with 100 persons on board must carry a doctor. Without them a ship is not allowed to leave port.

M.O.T. Foreign-Going Agreements are opened either for a fixed period of six months, or for a single voyage, which can last for up to two years, and on joining his ship, each officer and rating signs the Articles of Agreement engaging himself to serve for the term of the Agreement. There are also Home Trade Agreements for ships operating solely in U.K. coastal waters, and these are for six-monthly periods. The majority of U.K. ratings are engaged direct by Masters from the Merchant Navy Establishment Pools at the ports where their ships happen to be, and are employed on a single Agreement basis. Engagements are normally arranged through the Dockyard R.F.A. Agents, who form an essential link between Headquarters and the ships. It is a prerequisite of engagement that each man must be a registered seaman, in possession of a Seaman's Discharge Book, in which is recorded his Merchant Navy Service, and Masters' endorsements on his conduct and ability.

On paying off, a seaman is free to re-engage on another R.F.A., or to join some other Company. This means that the rating personnel of the R.F.A. Service is constantly changing, and to counteract this, a Company Service Contract Scheme was introduced some years ago. Under this scheme a rating can sign a 2 year contract, which is renewable for a further 2 years on expiry, and in return the seaman is guaranteed employment for this period, with pay between appointments and a number of other benefits, including higher pay and leave allowances, and a non-contributory pension scheme for Petty Officers and senior ratings. Company Service ratings are appointed to ships by Admiralty, and provide a nucleus of men skilled in replenishment-at-sea duties, which requires, of course, an experience which cannot be gained elsewhere. A similar scheme

is operated by S.N.S.O. Malta for the Maltese seamen, and in fact, the majority of Maltese ratings are Company Servants.

Asian seamen are employed only on a single voyage basis, but some have served for many years in the R.F.A., and in due course qualify for long-service gratuities on final discharge. Singapore Chinese and Seychellois seamen are recruited from Seamen's Registry Offices, which are Government Agencies, but, as might be expected from the Hong Kong "free-enterprise" economy, Hong Kong seamen have for many years been obtained from boarding-house keepers, known as "compradores", who, in return for a percentage of a man's wages, find him employment, and support him while he is ashore waiting for a ship. Shipping Companies employ their own compradores, and, as a result, can be sure of obtaining a good proportion of "Company men" on each ship. Talks are now proceeding at Hong Kong with a view to introducing a Seamen's Recruitment Office, which would replace the compradore system, but it is expected that seamen will be able to register on a "Company List", and thus the link with the present Company men will not be broken.

The recruitment and appointment of R.F.A. officers is entirely in the hands of Headquarters staff, and the majority of officers employed are Company Servants. Recruitment is arranged largely by means of newspaper advertisements, although a growing number of officers are obtained from the R.F.A. apprenticeship schemes. The Engineer apprenticeship scheme was introduced as recently as 1954 but already we have two Second Engineers and several Third Engineers who entered as Apprentices at the age of about 17. As officers' leave allowances on the larger ships now range from 75-105 days leave for 12 months sea service, an appreciable "leave pool" has to be maintained to ensure that ships are always fully manned.

There is an old R.F.A. joke that appointments are made by throwing darts in a board bearing ships' names instead of numbers, anyone who lands in the bull being appointed to Admiralty for special duties! It is a pleasant fantasy, and one which, on occasions, the staff of N.S. 3B might have wished were true! In fact there are many considerations which have to be taken into account in filling a particular vacancy. When sufficient sea-time has been accumulated Junior Officers apply for study leave to enable them to sh for a higher certificate of competency, which they must have to achieve promotion, and it would clearly be uneconomical to appoint to a Far East Station ship an officer who would shortly be requiring study leave. The R.F.A. service contains ships of all sizes performing a variety of duties unequalled in any other Shipping Company, and so far as is practicable appointments are varied to ensure that, by the time he reaches senior rank, an officer has had experience of all types of ship, both on Stations abroad and in U.K. waters. Engineers holding only Steam Certificates require experience in motor vessels, to enable them to gain motor endorsements to their certificates, and vice versa.

Although life in the R.F.A. personnel section is often hectic it is never dull, and can be very rewarding, not least because of the opportunities for personal contacts with the officers and ratings of the R.F.A. Service which the work affords.