

ROYAL FLEET AUXILIARIES PLAY KEY ROLE FOR THE RN by Brian Ingpen

Even an undiscerning eye would detect an unusual vessel in Simon's Town. While the destroyer **HMS Edinburgh** berthed at the Waterfront for a few days before a short sojourn in Simon's Town, the Royal Fleet Auxiliary tanker **Gold Rover** put into the naval port.

Gold Rover was the penultimate of five similar 140-metre ships that sport a prominent funnel. The first of this class, **Green Rover**, slid down the ways at the Swan Hunter yard in Wallsend in 1969, and **Gold Rover** entered service five years later.

The century-old RFA fleet history is recorded in a fascinating book published last year, **The Royal Fleet Auxiliary - A Century of Service** by Thomas Adams and Jimmy Smith. Smith, a product of the General Botha, is a serving officer aboard RFAs, and although the book is largely an interesting chronology of the development of this unusual service, some insights come obviously from his onboard experiences.



Figure 1 *Grey Rover anchored off St Helena island in 2002 to commemorate the quincentenary of the island's discovery.*

Supply ships - including colliers - went ahead of Royal Navy's flotillas to ensure that the warships had sufficient victuals for the crew and sufficient supplies of cobbles to keep the ships' furnaces well-trimmed.

That role has expanded to carrying ammunition, general stores and as oil replaced coal, sophisticated tankers became the dominant ships among the sizeable RFA fleet that traverses the world. And they still clock up the miles.

While doing a communications course in the navy some 40 years ago, our instructor was a seasoned ex-Royal Naval warrant officer whose ribbons included a "*mentioned in dispatches*" from the Arctic convoys. Amidst the incessant Morse code transmissions, voice radio exercises and typing lessons - a most useful skill that enabled me to bash about 40 words a minute from that old Remington - he would reminisce occasionally about the "*old days*" and, contrary to all naval protocol, exhorted us to join the Royal Fleet Auxiliary service. "*They have it best,*" he said in his Yorkshire brogue. "*You're assured of a job, you don't have all the naval drama, and you see the world!*"

True to my communications instructor's sales pitch, they do call at interesting places - and in times of conflict some have had narrow squeaks, and others have been lost.

During the Falklands war of 1982, four of the Sir Galahad class of landing logistics vessels were badly damaged while landing troops and equipment. Badly damaged during an

Argentine air raid and still containing a number of bodies that could not be extricated from her burnt hulk, **Sir Galahad** was towed out to sea and sunk as a war grave.

Digressing to last night, I enjoyed a most pleasant evening aboard **RMS St Helena** for the annual dinner of the **Ship Society**, courtesy of the ship's master and **Andrew Weir Shipping**. While aboard that delightful ship, I wandered down memory lane to one of my visits to the Island of St Helena that co-incided with the quincentenary of the island's discovery.

Anchoring in James Bay a few days after our arrival at the island was **Grey Rover**, sent by the British government for the celebrations on St Helena. A party of officers and ratings from the RFA participated in the parade in Jamestown on the special day, but since the RFAs are technically merchant ships, the marching by that platoon did not quite emulate the traditional smartness of their Royal Naval counterparts who curiously were absent from the celebrations.

There was a more sombre purpose of the RFA's call - to commemorate an event that had occurred off the island almost 60 years previously.

Darkdale, new to the RFA tanker fleet at the time, was anchored in James Bay to serve as a refueling depot for warships as they passed St Helena en route to various theatres of war.

Island shipping records - a goldmine of information for shipping fanatics like me - show that numerous British battleships and aircraft carriers called to refuel, as did several ships familiar to South Africans, but pressed into wartime service.

In October 1941, a recluse who lived in a cottage along the cliff tops, rushed into town one morning to report that he had seen a submarine. He was not taken seriously, and his claim was not relayed to **Darkdale's** master. The man had in fact spotted **U68**, one of the first German submarines to venture to the South Atlantic.

That night, while the master, chief engineer and purser dined with the garrison commander in the military barracks above Jamestown, **U68** manoeuvred to torpedo the tanker.

Ashore, two ratings lay in the Jamestown hospital, and another two wandered to the landing place, where they found the boatman. "*You'll have to wait for the Captain!*" came the firm response from the boatman to the crewmen's pleas to be taken to their ship.

As they remonstrated with the adamant boatman - their remonstrations aided by their shoreside shenanigans earlier in the evening - a series of deafening explosions shook the town and were followed by fireballs leaping hundreds of metres as **U68's** torpedoes hit their target.

"*The whole valley was lit up,*" recall several older Jamestown residents on whose young minds the event had been vividly imprinted, "*and we could see those huge flames.*"

Although the London RFA memorial lists 37 names, 41 **Darkdale** crewmembers died that night in the first sinking by a submarine in the southern hemisphere.

Fuel oil still oozes from the wreck, but fortunately, is carried by the current and trade wind well clear of the pristine island coastline.

I understand that ***Gold Rover*** will sail from Simon's Town this week.