

Bourne toWrite...

creative writing
workshops

Kit Muster

by Richard Lewis

There was a saying in the navy, ‘if it moves salute it, if it doesn’t clean it or paint it’. Understandably, everything onboard had to be ship shape and Bristol fashion. Sailors quarters needed to be kept neat and secure due to limited space and turbulence at sea.

Shore establishments were no different and kit muster (inspection) was a regular feature at St Vincent. There was a vast array of kit to be displayed, besides the traditional ‘square rig’ uniform, consisting of bell bottomed trousers, tight-waisted jumper, collar and white-topped circular cap. The term ‘quare rig’ refers back to a sail and rigging arrangement in which the primary driving sails are carried on horizontal yardarms, creating a square look. These ships were called square-riggers.

Kit muster requires trainees to lay out a multitude of clothing on the deck in front of their bunks. Everything had to be rolled or folded into tidy parcels in the prescribed manner, the width of the Manual of Seamanship, wherever practical. Jackson’s ramrod straight frame stomped around with the usual swagger, shouting, swearing and intermittently instructing. Then we would each in turn stand to attention giving our name, stating “Kit ready for inspection sir.” Jackson would then pull everything apart, checking every detail as we waited for his casual verdict. The whole performance left Stephen shorted, shirted, trousered and jacketed; in fact uniformed to within inch of his life.

Most had managed a reasonable job but Wally’s fumbling hands struggled to create order out of the dozens of pieces of kit. When it was his turn to have judgement passed, Jackson didn’t even bother to look closely at the sorry presentation. He just leaned forward, raised on tiptoes and screamed, “what the fuck d’you call that Parsons? Looks like a pile of stinking turds.” He then kicked the sorry pile with his unforgiving jackboot, sending the articles scampering along the gleaming deck, like a clowder of frightened cats. Wally hung his head in shame and was sentenced to attend remedial classes in the art of folding and presenting kit.

Stephen wondered, 'what on earth is going on with wally? He seemed to get by with other instructors but when it came to Jackson everything fell apart. He seemed programmed to get it wrong.' It reminded Stephen of encounters with his father when given a job to complete, the rising anxiety made the task seem insurmountable. Even the simple act of making him a cup of tea was sure to lead to criticism. He could never get it right; it would either be too milky, too sweet, too strong or not strong enough. 'Perhaps that was it, he thought, 'maybe Wally was getting Jackson mixed up with someone else.'

Monday's and Thursdays were dhobi days, (dhobi being Indian for wash). Our initiation into the fine art of naval hand washing was an unforgettable experience. We were told to wrap our dirty clothing into a sheet, dress in shorts and tee-shirt and assemble at the dhobi shack. A dingy open windowed room with sinks attached to three walls and two huge baths at the centre of the space. We were all issued with a large block of what looked like cheese, which we were told was pussers hard, (pusser meaning navy, hard because the soap was not just hard but impossibly hard to get a lather out of).

Jackson instructed us on the prescribed naval hand washing method. "I want you to pay special attention to your dung hampers (underpants), I'm sure you'll recognise your own skid marks. You have to attack those stains; get on with it now, attack those stains."

Having washed and rinsed our smalls, as with kit inspection, everything had to be presented to Jackson, repeating the procedure if not passing the test. Hadley, who was not the fussiest individual when it came to cleaning was the first to fail twice and Jackson ordered him to immerse himself in one of the large baths filled with icy cold water. He emerged shivering, his lips turning blue, yet still managing a brave smile. This severe treatment seemed to improve everyone's performance immensely.

Stephen came to realise that the navy was all about putting on a shaw and how things looked on the outside. There must have been many a miserable young lad wondering just what he'd done to deserve such harsh treatment but no one spoke about it. You just had to suck it up and keep your upper lip well and truly set.

They could make you clean your kit, turn you out smartly for Sunday's parade and get you to march in step but they couldn't clean up the mess inside. It was just painting over the cracks which were sure to break through eventually.