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The “General Botha”

BY CAPTAIN IVOR C. LITTLE (SOUTH AFRICA)

The resurgence of interest in the training ship **Vindicatrix**, through the medium of the pages of *Sea Breezes*, has been a fascinating topic to those who have followed it. First there was an article on the ship, then a series of letters from those who served in her, mainly of the “where are they now?” type and then more recently a series of times and dates for “Old Vindie” get-togethers. Obviously the original article evoked old memories and triggered a need to revitalise the “Old Indie” association – quite successfully too, it would seem.

But who are, or were, these Vindie Boys? Through the medium of *Sea Breezes* they seem to have shot from nowhere to prominence, and good luck to them too. Prior to this, however, it is hard to recall having heard much about this particular training ship. At the risk of fiery rebuttal I must say that other more famous training ships in the English speaking world formed a First League which produced far more and, dare I say it, far more famous graduates.

This First League I would consider to be (in no particular order) the **Conway**, **Worcester**, **Pangbourne**, **Southampton**, **Dufferin** (India), **General Botha** (South Africa) and **Kings Point** (USA). These, I believe, were the leading training ships of the English speaking world in the period 1900 to 1970. Out of these it was the **Conway**, **Worcester** and **General Botha** which fed the great liner companies with cadets who went on to become the masters, commodores and marine superintendents of those companies, and yet one rarely reads of those three proud institutions. Certainly in almost a lifetime of subscribing to *Sea Breezes* I have never come across the **General Botha** mentioned in its pages and yet there must be literally hundreds if not more readers of this magazine who have sailed with “Botha Boy” officers. In the great heyday of British Empire/Commonwealth shipping there were “Botha Boys” on bridges ranging from Alfred Holts to Zim Lines. They figured prominently in World War II, producing the Battle of Britain air ace “Sailor” Malan, Bomber Command VC Jack Nettleton, and high ranking officers in the Commonwealth armed forces. It was, and still is, the proud boast of the **General Botha**

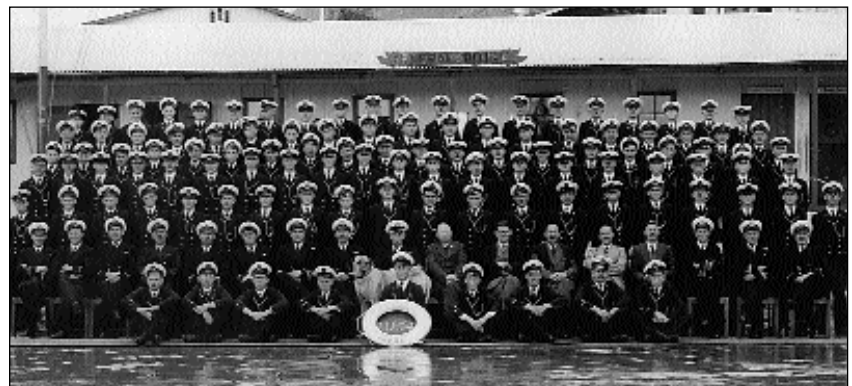
that it produced more medals and decorations per capita during World War II than any other school in the British Empire.

It is however a sad but true fact that with South Africa’s withdrawal from the British Commonwealth in 1961 South Africans disappeared from British ships and many firm friendships and associations were broken during the apartheid era. Changes in educational methods led to the demise of the **General Botha** in the 1980s and its place was taken by a Technicon. However, the proud tradition lives on and there are still many “Botha Boys” at sea.

The **General Botha** took its name from the first Prime Minister of South Africa and was originally, like the **Conway** and the **Worcester** housed afloat. This floating home was the turn-of-the-century ex-British River-class light cruiser **Thames**. During World

War II the cadets were moved from the ship at anchor in Simon’s Bay (Simon’s Town) because of the threat posed by submarines, to the top of the mountain above the town in temporary quarters known as Red Hill. In 1948 they were moved to a permanent home known as the South African Nautical College **General Botha** at Gordon’s Bay, across False Bay from Simon’s Town, and in 1966 were moved again to larger quarters at Granger Bay outside Cape Town in Table Bay. Those buildings are still in use today.

The **General Botha** was a tough school and no place for “sissies”. At its peak in the fifties it had about 100 cadets, fifty seniors and fifty juniors doing a two-year course, and so was graduating fifty cadets a year, including engineering cadets. The two years at the **General Botha** gave a one year’s remission of sea time, but was hard earned.



Capt I. C. Little

Ship’s Company 1954 – The 109 cadets shown here were destined to go to sea in the British, South African and Dutch Merchant Navies, and the Royal and South African Navies. Approximately 25 of them remained at sea long enough to achieve command in the British, South African, Canadian, Australian, New Zealand and Israeli Merchant Navies and the South African Navy.

The original buildings of this period in Gordon's Bay consisted of an ex-South African Air Force air-sea rescue base. It had a cavernous hangar type main hall in which the fifty junior cadets slept in tiered bunks whilst the seniors were housed in pre-fab corrugated iron buildings. The rest of the establishment, except for the captain's house, "bridge" and seamanship room, consisted of a collection of more corrugated iron huts. The toilet facilities were primitive – concrete trough urinals open to the sky and antiquated showers heated by a small fire stoked by a duty cadet.

Although these were replaced by a modern purpose-built college in 1954 the daily routine remained unaltered, and was designed to keep the young lads on the go so that they would stay out of mischief and collapse exhausted into bed at night to sleep the sleep of the just.

First call – "Batmen and Duty Bugler Turn Out" was at 0530 (cadet captains had junior cadets as batmen). Reveille was a bugle call at 0600, followed by a mad stampede to the showers. Those readers who think that "Sunny South Africa" is true must take note that six o'clock on a dark, wet winter morning in the Cape is hell, particularly if the duty cadet was remiss in stoking the hot water boiler! This was followed by "cleaning stations" (the polishing of brass and the bailing of boats), physical training on the parade ground, breakfast, "divisions" (parade ground drill and morning prayers), and then school for the rest of the day, broken only by lunch. The usual academic subjects were taught, but with navigation and seamanship included. At 1600 it was time for tea and buns followed by compulsory sport – sailing, boat pulling, rugby and cricket. Swimming was a luxury, as was the cinema and only happened at weekends. After supper it was prep, cleaning stations (sweeping and tidying), evening prayers and bed at 2100. This routine never varied.

Saturdays were "clean ship" mornings followed by captain's rounds and competitive sport with a film in the evening, whilst Sundays were a sequence of captain's divisions, church and a free afternoon for loafing or catching up on laundry or letter writing.

In the later days of the **General Botha** this routine was still enforced. Unfortunately however the **General Botha** was then sited at Granger Bay between a nurses' home and an hotel, leading to after hours disciplinary problems and some very tired cadets!

This routine had some strange spin-offs. Because of the lack of any real practice the cricket team was useless, but the rugby team with its muscular young toughs was feared throughout the schoolboy league! The band with its duty buglers and duty drummers and



The Colours, the Band and Port Watch taking up their positions. The sailing ship in the background is the one third scale replica of the Dutch East-Indiaman "Drommedaris" flagship of the squadron which took occupation of the Cape of Good Hope for the Dutch under Surgeon Commandant Jan Van Riebeeck in 1652. This tri-centenary had been celebrated two years previously and after doing a few re-enactments of various events the "Drommedaris" was hauled up on dry land in an abortive attempt at preservation. She was scrapped due to dry rot in the 1960s.

daily parades used to walk away with the school band trophy every year. Daily boat work enabled the cadets to compete on an equal footing at regatta days against the Royal and South African Navies at Simon's Town, particularly the "A" whaler crew. The "Brass Bound" uniform was always a hit with the young ladies of Cape Town and its environs and the wearing of it, the regular drilling and the quasi-naval training allowed many **General Botha** cadets to make careers in the armed forces. This produced over time five admirals and one air vice- marshal and a South African Merchant Navy which ran some particularly smart ships.

During the two years which included visits to naval and merchant ships, a lot of boyish illusions were shattered and the drop out rate was high after graduation when many felt that they had already had enough of the sea to last a lifetime. Those who still opted to go to sea had a wide choice of companies in which to do so, and the list of those companies today reads like a roll of honour of the British Merchant Navy.

The house flags of the companies which had accepted **General Botha** cadets were, by tradition, displayed in the main hall and starting with Union-Castle and Sir William Reardon Smith's (who took the first "Botha" cadets) the flags expanded to include Hogarth's, Port Line, Shaw, Saville, Andrew Weir, the Ellerman Group, Alfred Holt, the British Tanker Company, Anglo-Saxon Petroleum, Mobil Oil, Clan Line, P&O, British India, the RFA, the Royal and South African Navies, Safmarine, Thesen's, Harrison's, Blue Star, South African Lines, Southern Steamships, the South African Railways and

many more. Individual cadets also went to companies in which they had family connections such as Holland-Africa and Cie Maritime Belge. Of course, once they got in to the maritime world they dispersed even further and the writer once met a "Botha Boy" in Tenerife who was the second officer of a Spanish inter-island passenger ship!

The passage of time, different political considerations and the changing patterns of seafaring have seen the demise of all our great sea training ships and colleges, but the last few generations of their cadets are still around. Now that South Africa is back in the Commonwealth **General Botha** boys are slowly drifting back in to the mainstream of shipping, but alas, with the exception of Andrew Weir's Bank Line and the P&O, all the great British lines that employed them have gone. Hopefully the memories and the friendships and above all, the legend, still linger on amongst their former shipmates and amongst the readers of this magazine.

Vindicatrix, Arethusa, Indefatigable, Exmouth and Mercury were all well-known names in the seafaring world, but somehow not quite in the same league. It is nice to read about them and one wishes their old boys every success in the future from one training ship graduate to another, but the fact remains that the "big boys" were the **Worcester, Conway** and to put the record straight, the **General Botha**. It is time the last named got a mention. ■

Editor's Note. The history of the **General Botha** was covered in the May issue, 1952.

Top of column photograph (page 327), the SATS **General Botha**, ex-HMS **Thames** (from *Sea Breezes'* archives).