

THE JOLLY ROGER

by Peter SMITH

The first reference to the Jolly Roger is back in the Middle Ages when it was known by the French term '*joli rouge*' (pretty red). 'Pretty Red' is certainly a misnomer, as the red flag has been used in war for centuries. One of the first groups to use the flag was the Poor Soldiers of Christ and the Temple of Solomon or as better known the 'Knights Templar'. The red flag continued to be used and caused terror and confusion among those who were opposing the force attacking as it represented '*No Quarter Given – None Asked*', in other words, they were fighting to the death. With the forced break up of the Knights Templar by the then reigning pontiff in Rome, several of the Knights' ships under the red flag attacked ships in the Mediterranean which flew their national flags showing their alliance to Rome and Italy, hence the beginning of organised piracy.

However, it was not until several centuries later that the '*joli rouge*' had moved from the Mediterranean to the oceans to terrorize mariners. It was during the Elizabethan period that privateers of the ilk of Sirs Francis DRAKE and Walter RALEIGH were commissioned by the British Government as sanctioned commerce raiders who began attacking French and Spanish merchant ships. The idea of flying flags that denoted white skeletons or bones on a black background began to appear, this was to put terror into the crews of the ships being attacked, it was not until the privateer was sure that he had achieved his prize, that the red flag would be raised, representing 'no quarter given'.

In 1674, King Charles II, by royal proclamation decreed that the British Admiralty enact the law that all British merchant ships fly the red flag with a red cross on a white background (the Cross of Saint George) in the left corner; this was to become the fore runner of today's Merchant Ensign, also known as the 'Red Duster'.

It was not until the end of the 17th century, that the Jolly Roger that we know of today evolved from dancing bones, cutlasses and skeletons. The first privateer to use the skull and crossed bones was Frenchman Emanuel WYNNE who hoisted it in the Caribbean with an hourglass below to show that time was running out. Exactly when or who bastardised the name of *joli rouge* to '*Jolly Roger*' is not known, however it appears to have been around this period.

Over the centuries, the various government sanctioned privateers who had a price on their head, evolved into greedy pirates and the black and white flag took on the sinister image of that of the *joli rouge*. This image was also encouraged by children's illustrated books of the late 19th century.

World War One

The use of the Jolly Roger declined and was all but forgotten, except in children's books, but it wasn't until Britain decided to acquire submarines in the early 20th century that it was to raise its head again. With various disparaging debates on the use of submarines in war, both by the members of government and in the press, that the former First Sea Lord, Sir Arthur Knyvet WILSON VC GCB OM GCVO RN Rtd who at the time of debate

was the Controller of the Navy declared, ***'Underwater weapons, they call 'em. I call them underhanded, unfair, and damned un-English. They'll never be any use in war and I will tell you why: I'm going to get the First Sea Lord to announce that we intend to treat all submarines as pirate vessels in wartime and we'll hang all crews.'***

This, to young submarine officer Max Kennedy HORTON was virtually a red rag to a bull.

By World War One, HORTON had been promoted to Lieutenant Commander and was the commanding officer in ***HMS E9***, one of the first ocean going submarines, and sailed from Harwich to patrol southwest of Heligoland at the start of war.

Within the first two months of war, HORTON was the first to produce results by sinking the German light cruiser ***Hela*** and the destroyer ***S.116*** several miles from the German coast. On returning to Harwich, HORTON, remembering the comments of the now retired admiral, had his crew make a Jolly Roger of skull and cross bones and flew it as he entered harbour, this was to represent a successful patrol. Being the first submarine to sink an enemy ship earned HORTON the Distinguished Service Order and recommendation for early promotion. Hence this early victory was the start of the Royal Navy submarines flying the Jolly Roger after a successful patrol.

HORTON's idea of flying the Jolly Roger did not fully catch on amongst fellow submarine commanders in World War One, but that was to change 21 years later.

World War Two

By the start of World War Two, HORTON had been promoted to Vice Admiral and awarded Knight Commander of the Bath (KCB), his earlier war experiences were an inspiration to the new generation of submariners, especially after Sir Max became Flag Officer Submarines. All during World War Two, returning submarines which had a successful patrol, their COs were proud to display their Jolly Roger.

It was during this war that symbols began to appear alongside the skull and cross bones representing what the submarine had achieved. A red bar denoted a warship torpedoed, a white bar a merchant ship torpedoed, a black bar with a white -U- represent a U-boat sunk by torpedo. Another symbol was crossed gun barrels and stars, every star around the barrels represented gun action. These are only an example of what may appear on the Jolly Roger, all up, the Royal Navy Submarine Museum have recognised at least 20 various war time symbols that have appeared on the many different flags during the war.

Post World War Two

During 1956, ***HMS Thorough*** was in Singapore and had just completed a refit, she was ordered to carry out a gun action bombardment against native Communist guerrilla camps in Malaysia. On the completion of the bombardment the crew were given permission to fly the Jolly Roger on return to Singapore. It was hastily made out of a potato sack with crossed gun barrels and a star. Later, on returning to England a new flag had been made showing the crossed gun barrels and a map of the world symbolising the fact ***Thorough*** was the first British submarine to circumnavigate the world.

British submarines since the 1980s have had a chance to fly the Jolly Roger when returning to port, **HMS Conqueror** after her attack in the Falkland Islands on the Argentine **ARA General Belgrano** her flag had a red stripe denoting she had torpedoed and sank a warship.

In May 1991, Oberon class submarines **HMS Opossum** and **Otus** returned to Gosport from Desert Storm, both flying Jolly Rogers, both were showing daggers representing they had successfully landed Special Air Service (SAS) and Special Boat Service (SBS) reconnaissance operations.

In May 1999, **HMS Splendid** had participated in the Kosovo Conflict in the former Yugoslavia, on her return to Faslane in Scotland, she showed her Jolly Roger with two crossed tomahawks representing that she became the first British submarine to fire cruise missiles in anger.

After the 9/11 attacks in 2001, **HMS Trafalgar** returned on 1 March 2002 to show her Jolly Roger with two crossed tomahawks, this was to show that she had fired cruise missiles against Al-Qaeda and Taliban forces. Her sister **HMS Superb** also returned from the same conflict, her Jolly Roger proclaimed a dagger, for force protection, a bee for her nickname (the Super B) and two lightning strikes representing communication flashes.

The latest submarine to fly the Jolly Roger was on 16 April 2003 when **HMS Turbulent**, being the first Royal Navy vessel to return to England from the war against Iraq, her flag showed crossed tomahawks after launching thirty cruise missiles.

The flying of the Jolly Roger is sanctioned even today by navies of the Commonwealth including Australia.

In 1986, **HMAS Ovens** was the first RAN submarine to undertake a live firing of the Mark 48 torpedo, her target was the former destroyer **HMAS Colac** which broke her back when the torpedo detonated under the ship, **Ovens** returned to **HMAS Platypus** flying the Jolly Roger, the first time in the history of the Australian Navy.

Later, **HMAS Onslow** in exercises off the Northern Territory in the 1990s managed on paper to torpedo every major ship in the exercise without being detected, the crew were proud to fly their Jolly Roger. There have been many times when the RAN could have flown the Jolly Roger, but security has dictated that it would not be proper to show the world what we have been involved in.