

The Corfu Incident – 1946

On Tuesday, 22 October 1946, under a grey and dull sky, four Royal Navy warships steamed north out of Corfu Harbour. In the lead was the cruiser, HMS *Mauritius*, wearing the flag of Rear Admiral Harold Kinahan, Flag Officer of the 1st Cruiser Squadron; five hundred yards behind her was HMS *Saumarez*, a destroyer and the Flotilla leader; then, after a gap of two miles, another cruiser, HMS *Leander*, and a second destroyer, HMS *Volage*.

They had arrived in Corfu five days earlier, a unit of the Royal Navy's 24-strong Mediterranean Fleet. The Fleet had left Malta at the end of September, and gathered at Nauplia before splitting into smaller units to conduct training; they were then to re-form in the Bay of Argostoli off Cephalonia, for the annual Fleet Regatta. While in Corfu, the ships' companies had spent their days refitting and refurbishing their ships, enjoying the delights of the island and the hospitality of its people. Indeed on the evening before they sailed, Admiral Kinahan held a reception onboard HMS *Mauritius* to celebrate the battle of Trafalgar in 1805, the most famous of all Royal Navy victories; it was attended by all the great and the good of the island, including, I'm sure, a large number of your parents, grandparents, and earlier family members!

Fourteen hours later, at 6.00h the following morning, the scene was very different. In the early hours of another overcast day, HMS *Volage* could be seen steaming slowly stern first into the harbour from the north – and having in tow, again stern first, HMS *Saumarez*. As the two warships approached the harbour, it could be seen that the bow of HMS *Volage* had disappeared, as if shorn off by a gigantic saw; and then the bow of HMS *Saumarez*, a mangled wreck, half-submerged in the water. They anchored in the harbour, together with HMS *Mauritius* and *Leander* who had steamed west about the island, and who, together with the aircraft carrier, HMS *Ocean*, were mobilizing their medical and logistic resources to aid the stricken vessels.

How had this drastic reversal of fortunes occurred in a mere matter of hours? And for the answer we need to go back six months, to May 1946, when ships from the Mediterranean Fleet had last been deployed in the North Channel. During the War, the Germans had laid two huge minefields to guard the Channel; but had maintained a mile-wide corridor for safe passage of their ships. When they retreated in 1944, the British assumed responsibility for the area; they undertook a 'check sweep' of the corridor, and declared it safe for all shipping.

On 15 May 1946, on a sunny day, two Royal Navy cruisers, HMS *Orion* and *Superb*, were directed to sail through the Channel north to south (because of the nature of the Corfu coastline, which shelves gently towards the Albanian shore, the swept corridor is, in places, notably around Denta Point, at the southern end of Saranda Bay, close to Albanian territory). At 0830h the warships, steaming in from the north west, made the almost 90 degree to starboard required by the seabed configuration; and almost immediately a seaman noticed a belch of white smoke on the hillside, subsequently identified at Limioni. He then heard the report, 'rather like a car backfiring' he thought. It was followed by another; in all, it was subsequently assessed, probably twelve 4 inch rounds, but with no identified fall of shot. They would all have fallen well behind the two ships who were increasing their speed towards Corfu harbour!

It was an incident, an insult to the Royal Navy, which was hard to explain whether in the Fleet or in Whitehall in London. And for both political and diplomatic reasons it attracted very little publicity. There was the inevitable exchange of Notes in which the UK insisted that the Channel was an international waterway and that, if in the future any British warship was engaged by a shore battery, fire would be returned; and Albania, while suggesting that it had all been a misunderstanding, nevertheless insisted that all foreign shipping, whether warships or merchant vessels, would have to get permission before sailing within three miles of her coastline.

Needless to say, no one within the Fleet or in Whitehall could conceive that a such small country, with no navy or air force, could consider taking on the might of the Royal Navy! However preparations were undertaken between the Admiralty in Whitehall and the Fleet in Malta to test this assumption! The concern in Government, where a new Labour administration had only recently been elected, was that Albania should not be unnecessarily provoked; an exchange of ambassadors was imminent, and at the same time the Government was keen to promote the successful establishment of the 'new' nations in Europe – as indeed elsewhere. While the Admiralty were concerned not to escalate the issue too far, Commander-in-Chief Fleet, Admiral Sir Algernon Willis, determined to clarify the situation by sending some ships through the Channel. He signalled the Admiralty on 22 September that 'my intention is that Admiral Kinahan, flying his flag in HMS *Mauritius*, with HMS *Leander* and two destroyers should (transit the Channel) when they depart Corfu on 22 October.'

It should be noted here – and can be discussed afterwards if there is time for any questions – that the Royal Navy warships, and indeed the Admiralty, were concerned about being engaged by shore batteries; they did not deploy any counter-mine measures, or stream paravanes. Indeed, Admiral Willis subsequently stated that '.....I knew of no reason at the time, nor have I thought of one since, why anyone should have suspected that the Albanians would lay mines, or have mines laid for them.....' It certainly suggests a certain lack of curiosity, particularly as his ships had 'check swept' the Channel for any German mines presumed to have been laid. And, of course, it subsequently became apparent, during the proceedings at the International Court, that Albania had indeed arranged for some mines to be laid by the Yugoslav navy during the week preceding the passage of the Royal Navy warships.

Let us turn now to what happened at sea after the four warships left Corfu Roads at 1330h on 22 October – and imagine that you are the Admiral on HMS *Mauritius*, with HMS *Saumarez*, *Leander*, and *Volage* following you. As the commander you have been made aware of the nature of your mission; and are concerned about being engaged by shore batteries. Even though you were aware of the 'check-sweep' of the corridor the year before, there was no suggestion that mines might be a threat. So none of your ships have deployed any mine-counter measures, nor streamed paravanes. By 1445h you are opposite Denta Point and signal your turn to port, followed by that of HMS *Saumarez*, to ensure that you stay in the cleared corridor. At 1453h, six minutes after her turn to port, a colossal explosion erupts beneath HMS *Saumarez* sending the bow rearing into the air; it rips out the starboard side of the ship, and leaves the bow section a mass of twisted, tangled metal. The blast rips open the

fuel tanks, and you can see the thick, black oil being carried by the tidal wave through the wrecked compartments of the ship, adding the threat of fire to the already mortally damaged vessel. There was an immediate assumption that the ship had been fired upon by the shore batteries – and it was subsequently reported to you that it was a veteran, who had seen many actions during the war, who advised a young officer, who hadn't, and who had put his helmet on his head, that 'I should sit on it if I was you, Sir, it wasn't a shell, it was a mine!'

While the situation on HMS *Saumarez* itself was dire – the commanding officer, Captain William Selby, had reported dead and wounded, little power, precarious communications – your increasing concern was that the ship, without power, was being blown on to the Albanian, and presumably hostile, shore. Rejecting any direct action, you order HMS *Volage*, at the rear of the Flotilla, to take the stricken ship in tow; HMS *Leander*, with too great a draught to be of immediate assistance, is to make best speed north and west through the Channel back to Corfu to organize the medical and logistic support.

You hear that HMS *Volage* is approaching HMS *Saumarez*, now uncomfortably close to a shoal where the depth was only 12 feet, shallow enough the ground both ships. She has also to effect the tow and navigate through a blaze of burning oil – which she achieves on the second attempt, attaching a rope to the stern of the damaged ship. Slowly, stern to stern, the two destroyers drag themselves back to the channel, away from the Albanian shore. The damaged bow of HMS *Saumarez*, wallowing in the water, upset the balance of the ship, resulting in a laboured and alarming, zig-zag route. Then, at 1615h, there was another massive explosion; it appeared to the crew of HMS *Volage* that the whole bow section of their ship had simply disappeared. She had indeed hit a mine; huge chunks of metal crashed onto the bridge, doors were ripped from their hinges, dazed seamen appeared from below – and the tow was broken. Nonetheless within fifteen minutes, the commanding officer, Commander Reggie Paul, despite the damage to his ship, determines to take HMS *Saumarez* again in tow. This time it is his ship which is unbalanced by the mass of twisted metal from his shattered bow which is dragging in the sea; so he has to proceed stern first, and manages to secure a line to HMS *Saumarez*. Now both ships are steaming stern first at about two miles an hour south back down the channel towards Corfu and safety.

Meanwhile you rally support. HMS *Leander* you have already despatched at top speed back to Corfu, west about the island; and you follow in HMS *Mauritius* once you are certain that the two stricken ships are out of further danger. Having discussed the situation with the Commander in Chief, you arrange for the aircraft carrier, HMS *Ocean*, with its firefighting and medical support capabilities, to join you in Corfu, as well as HMS *Raider*, another destroyer, to rendezvous with HMS *Saumarez* and HMS *Volage* to provide more immediate firefighting support.

By 0200h you are back in Corfu harbour coordinating relief from HMS *Mauritius*. HMS *Leander*, you direct to take both HMS *Volage* and HMS *Saumarez* in tow, while HMS *Ocean* assumes responsibility for the wounded; by 0300h the two destroyers are secured in the harbour. You visit the two ships, you speak to the crews, and begin the distressing task of dealing with the dead; a total of 44 died either during the Incident or shortly thereafter, and there was a similar number of wounded. Throughout the early hours of the morning, you notice that the local Corfiot people are coming to the harbour, silently, heads bowed, in recognition of the tragedy of which they felt so much a part.

And on the following day, 24 October, they are there in even larger numbers as the funerals of the dead take place. As the diary of a young Corfiot states: ‘...the local people are really sad for the event. Sad. Deeply sad!’

By the end of the week the armada of ships which had assembled in Corfu begins to disperse; some go to Argostoli to take part in the delayed Fleet Regatta, some, including the two damaged warships, return directly to Malta, while you are directed to conduct a wide-ranging minesweeping operation in the North Channel.

The action now moves to the international arena, to the chancelleries in Europe, to the UN, and finally to the International Court in the Hague.

Before I finish, I would very much like to acknowledge the advice, support, and assistance which I have received from the Albert Cohen Association – and particularly from Spiros Giourgas who sent me so many of the photographs which you will have seen during the last 20 minutes and which come from the Association’s archives; and also to thank to Roxani Politi, the General Secretary of the Association, and Sophia Michalopoulos who have guided me along the way,

And, finally, I feel that I should apologize for not being a sailor – but rather a soldier. In the past you have had very distinguished sailors – and ships – to assist you in commemorating this event; on the 50th anniversary in 1996, I see that Admiral Sir Jock Slater, **First Sea Lord and** the Chief of Naval Operations was here. All I can say in mitigation is that the very first battle honour awarded my regiment in the British Army, the Royal Green Jackets, was for our operations with Admiral Nelson at the Battle of Copenhagen in 1802, when we manned the riggings of his ships – and ever since then there has been a naval crown supporting our cap badge!