The COBBOLD Family History Trust

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H M Y Britannia, the Royal Yacht of Her Late Majesty Queen Elizabeth II

Part 2 ….*and the rescue of a thousand civilians*

The death in July this year of **Rear-Admiral Sir John Garnier, KCVO, CBE**, who was **Flag Officer Royal Yachts** from 1985 to 1990 reminds us that although **H M Y Britannia's** alternative design as a hospital ship was never tested, she was caught up in dramatic action.

In January 1986 *Britannia* was half way to **New Zealand** preparatory to a royal tour when civil war between rival Marxist factions broke out in **Aden** and she was ordered to divert. What followed was Operation **Balsac** which saw over 1000 people of some 55 nationalities evacuated under fire by *Britannia*.

Sir John's association with the Royal Family goes back to 1956 when he served on *Britannia* as a young officer. He went on to command the frigate ***Minerva*** (1972-3) with the **Prince of Wales** on board as a junior officer and was in command of the destroyer ***London*** when, as **Director of Naval Operations** in 1982 he released the signal that set the **Falklands** task force in motion.

He is remembered by one of his ships' Company as the man under whom they would have "gone over the top" without a murmur of complaint. Handsome and always immaculate, he was gentle, funny without a trace of unkindness, and possessed of a discretion so complete that even his own family struggled on occasion to establish quite what he had done in 40 years of naval service until details of Aden came to light.

We are privileged to possess a first-hand account of the evacuation of Aden from family member **Surgeon Commodore Tim Douglas-Riley CBE QHP (1949-)** #859 who later went on to become **Assistant Chief of Staff (Medical)** and an **Honorary Physician** to H M The Queen. Here is an edited version of his story:

*I was the Principal Medical Officer on board the Royal Yacht. We were just departing the Red Sea, having transited the Suez Canal, when fighting broke out in Yemen presenting a grave risk to the many British subjects living there. With the full agreement of the Queen and with Rear-Admiral John Garnier, Flag Officer Royal Yachts in command of the squadron, the Royal Yacht remained off Aden while H M ships **Newcastle** and **Jupiter** with Royal Fleet Auxiliary **Brambleleaf** steamed in to the rescue.*

With many foreign ships in the area consultation was required and Britannia hosted a Russian sea captain as an interpreter. I was given responsibility for "Boris" who was a hugely engaging man and taught me to say "my friend will pay" in Russian.

Hundreds of evacuees of all nations came on board and it was decided to corral them in the major spaces of the Royal Dining and Drawing rooms. Furniture, pictures and artefacts were removed and carpets covered. The Galley cranked up to provide food but the bathroom facilities were two decks below.

Evacuees who arrived bedraggled from wading out to the boats were given naval Action Working Dress.

French ladies turned up their over-long trousers to calf length and paraded the upper deck like catwalk models.

Asian labourers hung out in drooping clothing like schoolboys in new too-large school uniforms.

Some evacuees regarded Britannia as a luxury liner and expected to see a hospital specialist not realising that I was the only medic on board.

One lady appeared stark naked from a bathroom holding out an empty glass jar asking a startled steward for more bath salts not realising she was holding a container for Pusser's gumption.

I treated a number of minor injuries and operated under anaesthetic on two men who had shrapnel wounds – all to good effect.

Between 15th and 24th January 1986 *Britannia* had rescued, under fire, 1068 refugees from 55 different nations, amongst which were the British Ambassador and some of his staff.

Baroness Young, Leader of the House of Lords stated:

'This is the first and only time that the Royal Yacht had been involved in an operation of this sort. It has received magnificent support from H M ships NEWCASTLE and JUPITER and Royal Fleet Auxiliary BRAMBLELEAF, with its merchant navy crew. I should like to pay tribute to Rear-Admiral John Garnier and all the officers and Royal Yachtsmen involved for the courage and professionalism they have shown in carrying out this operation in conditions of danger and difficulty.

We can all be proud of them.'

Anthony Cobbold