

# HMS Foudroyant - September 1943



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My association with Portsmouth, the Royal Navy and then HMS Foudroyant began a few years before the war, when an uncle retired from the Army and settled in Portchester. So from about 1936 with my family, I regularly stayed there.

My association with uniforms (which has followed me through my life is by chance) started at an early age when my parents enrolled me into the local cubs troop - not I suspect for my benefit but to get me from under their feet for a few hours. I then progressed to the scouts. Every year they had a camp in an estate at Cromer where we had to drag a tree trunk to a clearing in the forest, attach a yardarm and haul the "mast" upright. We learnt to live with others in tents (not sophisticated as the models today), light fires, use biscuit tins as ovens etc. - which would give "elf & safety" the vapours today. All learning to live together, roughing it and independence etc..

September 1939 life changed. Evacuation, no scouts, no school and the end of my formal education. Early in 1940 I started work in the city where later there was another learning curve - the Blitz.

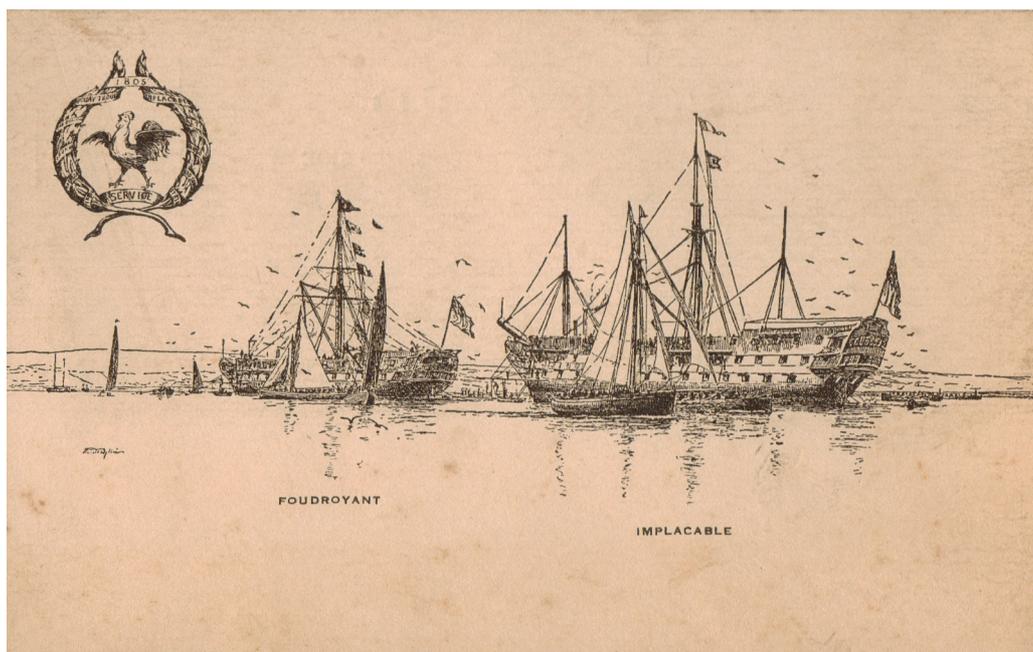
In June 1940 the Navy League (which can trace its origins back to 1856 - after the Crimean War) started cadet courses on T.S. Bounty moored at Worcester, these cadets then joined the Navy as partially trained men. This appealed to the Admiralty who sponsored the formation of the Sea Cadet Units around the country, increasing by 1942 one hundred various cadet formations into some four hundred under one umbrella - The S.C.C.

So with my association with cubs, scouts etc. it seemed only natural for me to enrol in the newly formed Sea Cadet Unit in Ilford in 1942. A friend of my father (who had served as a signalman before and during the Great War) was commissioned into this unit. Thus knowing me and my fair knowledge of morse and semaphore it was around me that the communications branch was formed. My father being a handyman also made a "tufnell box" for the unit.

In 1942 I cycled from my home in Essex to Portchester and during my stay arrangements had been made for me to go on board HMS Foudroyant with Harold Wyllie (the ship was then moored on the Gosport side of the harbour). I remember little of the day except being shown an old plan of how to sling the maximum number of hammocks on the mess deck. (There was no sign then of the ship being used for storage as has often been suggested.)

On the first September 1943 (having only undergone a standard medical - no other tests) and as a direct entrant from Cadets to "Royal Navy communications branch" via a special scheme, later known as the "Bounty Scheme", I found myself standing on Portsmouth Harbour station at 4 O'Clock on a Sunday afternoon with many lads in "tidley" uniforms adorned with a variety of ranks and badges. Once collected by a Petty Officer we boarded a harbour launch and were transported out to HMS Foudroyant, where all badges etc. had to be immediately removed. Next day we were taken (by harbour launch) to HMS Victory IV at Gosport and equipped with "pusser" (Naval, and mostly ill fitting) uniform and other necessary items, e.g. kitbag, gasmask, hammock, and cut throat razor. The rest of the day was spent trying to make uniforms presentable, by our standards, how to sling a hammock and get into it. We were all under

seventeen and a half years old, and therefore classed as "Boys" - 2nd class at that - receiving the princely sum of 3/- (15p) per week, and for that princely sum the Paymaster only came out to the Ship once every two weeks. I survived on postal orders from home.



*Postcard of HMS Foudroyant and HMS Implacable drawn by Harold Wyllie*

In June/July the two ships were moved from their moorings off Gosport to new moorings a few hundred yards off Portchester Castle between Fareham and Portchester Creeks, with HMS Foudroyant tied up alongside HMS Implacable and both ships commissioned into the Royal Navy as HMS Foudroyant (there being A/C Implacable). As I remember we were only allowed to use the upper deck, poop deck, captain's cabin beneath the poop deck of HMS Implacable, and on occasions the mess deck for instructional purposes. Around the poop deck rails were Morse keys. A couple of cables astern was a "Coaling Depot", just sufficiently distant from us not to be covered in black dust as various vessels "coaled ship". Yes, there were still a number of craft in 1943 powered by coal (most no doubt wartime requisitions.)

The resident crew - at that time - comprised the C.O., a Lt.Cdr. RN, Lt. Wyllie was No. 1, a couple of other officers, about 3 CPO.s, 3 or 4 PO.s, and quite a few mostly 3 badger Quartermasters - probably all recalled from retirement.

First task of the day would be scrubbing down the upper deck - barefooted, trousers rolled up above the knee, a Q.M. controlled the line of hose, no doubt, in the cause of safety - ours and the ship's. Working hours were spent, as I recollect, practicing semaphore, Morse by flag, light and buzzer, flag hoists and marching (in a confined space). I am sure there had to be other useful lessons! Undoubtedly we must have been fully employed.

Outside working hours and during "make and mend" we would be occupied on boat work. To access the small boats one had to get over the side of the ship, down a rope ladder to the boom, along to the end of the boom (this was achieved at first with some trepidation, balance and a hope not to fall off) then down another rope ladder to the boats. I remember racing another gig around the harbour with such enthusiasm that someone broke an oar. Again in the interests of safety a QM would cox the boats. From the davits was either or both Cutter and Whaler. It took many attempts to even look like a rowing crew, and as for tossing 16 ft oars, I could barely get my hands around the loom it took much effort, practice and skill.



*Signalling Practice*



*Accessing small boat via the boom*

At the end of the day, if used, these boats had to be hoisted back to the davits on the starboard quarter of HMS Implacable. The lower deck was cleared for this task. The boat was hooked onto the falls, we formed a double line along the upper deck with the two lines between us. The order was given "take up the falls", then "marry the falls", followed by "take the strain" and finally "heave". Upon this order we all heaved with gusto to get the boat unstuck from the water. It was then running forward clasping the falls towards the forecastle, then aft to keep the momentum going till the boat was close up to the davits and secured.

At night - between lights out and "wakey wakey" - a patrol was maintained on both main and upper decks. Some odd sounds could certainly be heard in the dead of the night, particularly for one's first experience on board two ancient and creaking "wooden" walls – more so with one in danger of falling apart. But, as far as I know, nothing untoward happened in our time. One of our class did sleep with his eyes open - quite spooky -. Another duty during the "quiet hours" would be fire watching on the upper deck, a relic of the bombing days.

A group of cadets from either Oxford or Cambridge joined us for a long weekend. There was one lad at least six feet tall but could never remember to duck his head when coming down to the mess deck, and everytime his head collided with the main deck beam overhead. A memory that has lasted over the years is of a QM coming up from the hold on a number of mornings with a rat trap some 12 inches long containing an equally large inmate with tail dangling from the end. The QM carried the cage down the gangway, lowered it under the water till the rat was dead and that seemed to take a loooooong time.

Shore leave was granted three times per two weeks i.e. approximately Wednesday evening, the next Sunday 1300 till 2100 and the following Saturday 1300 till 2100. Times depending to a degree upon when the liberty boats (harbour launches that carried men and materials between ship and shore), arrived alongside, then deposited us at Victory Steps. (In those days Portsmouth Division was HMS Victory, now it is HMS Nelson.) Having an aunt ashore I naturally made for Portchester, thus the high (or low) life of Pompey eluded me. My parents came down one weekend, and from a jewelers 'neath Portsmouth Station Bridge, brought me a silver chain upon which my "dog tag" remained for the rest of my service - my wife now has the chain.

My memory for details from nearly 70 years ago are fading fast. From what other classmates have said it appears that no one had taken an aptitude test before acceptance, so perhaps our 5 weeks were a test of suitability. Whatever, I am sure everyone on board enjoyed the course with a bonus of absolutely glorious weather. We, I am positive, formed the first class on HMS Foudroyant and was the foundation of all future courses until the scheme finished in January 1947. From the beginning in 1941 until September 1943 there had been other venues starting with T.S. "Bounty", then "Belle Isle", at Windermere and "Grenville Hall", at Slough. These other locations probably ceased when HMS Foudroyant came into operation.

In 1987, having retired I moved to North Yorkshire at the same time as "Foudroyant" moved to Hartlepool when ship and I met up again. I have known this ship for over one third of its lifetime.

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