

UNITED KINGDOM: Navy

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Sober men and true

By Christopher McKee

The image of the naval sailor is that of an enigmatic but compelling figure, a globe-trotting adventurer, swaggering and irresponsible in port but swift to flex the national muscle at sea and beyond. Appealing as this popular image may be, scant effort has been expended to reveal the truth behind the stereotype. Thanks to Christopher McKee's groundbreaking work, it is now possible to hear from sailors themselves--in this case, those who served in Great Britain's Royal Navy during the first half of the twentieth century. McKee has scoured sailors' unpublished diaries, letters, memoirs, and oral interviews to uncover the lives and secret thoughts of British men of the lower deck. From working-class childhoods teetering on the edge of poverty to the hardships of finding civilian employment after leaving the navy; from sexual initiation in the brothels of Oran and Alexandria to the terror of battle, the former sailors speak with candor about all aspects of naval life: the harsh discipline and deep comradeship, the shipboard homoeroticism, the pleasures and temptations of world travel, and the responsibilities of marriage and family. McKee has shaped the first authentic model of the naval enlisted experience, an account not crafted by officers or civilian reformers but deftly told in the sailors' own voices. The result is a poignant and complex portrait of lower-deck lives.

More details**Sober men and true: sailor lives in the Royal Navy, 1900-1945****By Christopher McKee****Edition: illustrated****Published by Harvard University Press, 2002****ISBN 0674007360**

other veterans of cells remembered harsher rations and slightly more varied reading fare than the Bible alone. "My diet consisted of ship's biscuit and water," said one Second World War sailor who did his time in the aircraft carrier *Indomitable*: "These ship's biscuits—for the information of those who never broke a tooth on them—were harder than any Blackpool landlady's heart, so the only possible way to eat these was to dunk them in water, otherwise you were in danger of a major dental refit. The choice of reading was either the *Manual of Seamanship* or the Bible. Having been a freethinker for several years . . . I decided to give this [latter] tome the benefit of the doubt and read it from cover to cover, which did nothing to convince me, but only reinforced my views."⁹ And then there was the isolation, a marine sentry the only human being with whom the offender had any contact. Cells? "Well, that's a very, very severe punishment."¹⁰

But there was a still harsher punishment: detention barracks ashore, where the captain could send a rating for up to three months on his own authority, with no questions asked—or where a sailor could be dispatched for a much longer period after a formal trial by a naval court martial. Detention's reputation was fearsome—"Men doing detention in Portsmouth had a very rough time, having [myself] talked to some when they came out," reported one rating secondhand; "as near to hell as one can reach this side of the grave," said another.¹¹ Unfortunately, the autobiographical narratives which are the foundation of *Sober Men and True* furnish only one brief glimpse into this experience: "In detention, coal ship routine. A 50-yard long shed, one end some tons of rubble, man given a wheelbarrow and shovel, fill and double to other end, empty and return, to complete movement of all rubble to opposite end, then back again to the original end and repeat, with no time limit given. This exercise gave me a feeling of complete frustration. No time was given for a breather, but the staff in charge always seemed to know the limit of endurance. A defender [*sic*] was never allowed to walk when under detention. Although very hard, I never considered any of the treatment I experienced to be cruel to a fit man."¹²

Boys, aged seventeen and younger, remained subject to the navy's tradition of corporal punishment, which had long since been abolished for adult ratings. That it survived for **boy** sailors was less an aberration

unique to naval life than a reflection of the larger society's belief in harsh, painful, and humiliating punishments as the appropriate way to correct young people's rule-breaking behavior. The ratings' narratives of childhood attest that many of them had regularly experienced beatings and whippings at home and in school. As practiced by the navy, corporal punishment provided a legitimated outlet for homoerotic sadism in punishers and audience.¹³

Corporal punishment took one of two forms. Boys were subject to the same "Index of Offences" in *The King's Regulations and Admiralty Instructions* as were adult ratings, but for boys the type of corporal punishment permitted was determined by whether the offense was printed in roman (less serious) or *italic* (more serious) type. Canings were meted out for the lesser offenses. Perhaps a boy hid in a ship's boat to avoid a muster, as Edward Pullen once did. The captain would sentence the culprit to six or twelve blows (or *cuts*) with a cane, three-and-a-half feet in length, thick as a man's thumb, and wrapped at either end with waxed twine to keep it from splitting when in use.¹⁴ A boy, wearing a pair of thin duck trousers—although there is at least one report of a boy being caned naked—was held down, customarily over the ship's vaulting horse used in gymnastics, buttocks upward, and given his six or twelve strokes with the cane, blows laid on slowly and with all the force that the master-at-arms could muster. Often all the ship's boys—but never the adult ratings—were assembled to witness canings. At other times they were administered in a closed space with only a portion of the ship's officers, the surgeon, the master-at-arms, and the ship's corporals as participant-witnesses.

More public, more humiliating, and more painful were the whippings administered with bundled birch branches and saplings—cautionary theater known as *birching*. Here was an ultimate sanction reserved for the most serious offenses: desertion, theft, striking a petty officer, or a homosexual encounter with an older sailor. The punishment was typically either twelve or twenty-four *cuts* with the birches. These instruments of correction were usually hung up in the steam of the ship's galley to make them supple enough to have knots tied in them, though there are also reports of birches being soaked in vinegar or saltwater before being used. As with *caning*, the culprit was bent over a vaulting

horse or over the ship's bits, but for a birching his buttocks were exposed and the entire ship's complement was assembled to be entertained, warned, or sickened by the event.

Chief Yeoman of Signals Thomas Wallace, who had himself experienced naval **caning** as a **boy**, described the punishment of "Paddy" Flynn, caught having sex with a pig and sentenced to dismissal from the navy: "The birching's got to be done at noon today! There's two birches hanging up in the galley in the steam. A birch is like a—sometimes you see 'em in the park with the sweeping, you know with a kind of a twigs all bound together. Well, a birch is that on the small scale. And it's hung up in the steam, in the galley, where the steam's going up in it all the time, making it brittle. It's there for about twenty-four hours and then it's taken down; and if you get twelve cuts they use one birch. But they wouldn't use a birch for more than twelve cuts; if there's any more than twelve they use another one. And it's on the **bare bottom**. Not on the back—on the bottom. And you're strapped over the bits and that's administered in . . . ! . . . ! like that. And you can see pieces of flesh flying up there. I think this fellow was in the sick bay . . . for about a fortnight before they could discharge him."¹⁵

The psychological effect of corporal punishment on sailors of the nineteenth-century British and American navies is contested historical ground. Those calling for the abolition of flogging asserted that the practice destroyed good men, humiliating them, breaking their spirits, and making them desertion-prone—that is, if the physical effects of a flogging did not maim or kill the punished men.¹⁶ Those who hold a more positive view of corporal punishment argue, on the basis of anecdotal sailor evidence, that men preferred corporal punishment to alternatives such as long periods in confinement. These revisionists reinforce their position with statistical evidence which, they argue, infers that corporally punished men continued to be good, effective sailors—that, in fact, sailors accepted corporal punishment as a necessary and salutary part of life at sea.¹⁷

Some twentieth-century sailors told of receiving canings themselves as **boy** ratings, testimony that may help shed light back into the nineteenth century. "The first stroke whistled through the air and seemed to cut one in half; hence the term *twelve cuts with the cane*. This punishment was only used on boys under the age of eighteen, but required the will of

a man to resist the suffering."¹⁸ When asked what the worst part of the experience was, one rating replied: "Humiliation. Having to face, or being thrashed, in front of all my messmates, my shipmates and so forth. Your pride is hurt very, very much—more than the physical side in my case."¹⁹

And the aftermath? Were there lingering psychological wounds? How did the caned boy face his messmates and older sailors? According to one old sailor who had himself never been caned, the victim "got a bit amenable. He didn't want any more of that." Asked if the victim put up a front, the sailor replied, "Oh yes, he come round and say, 'Well, that's all right. I can put up with that. It never hurt me.' But all the time perhaps it did, look, you see." How did other sailors behave around the punished boy? "Never used to bother too much. Used to say, 'Well, now you knows better than to go on, don't you?'—or something like that. Never used to—used to accept it as part of the things that, you know, had to happen."²⁰

The only acceptable response to caning or birching, if one was to remain a sailor, was to endure the punishment and reveal no outward sign of suffering. Arthur Crosby, a twenty-five-year veteran of the navy who ended his career as a chief petty officer, reported that over the span of those twenty-five years, he "experienced most forms of punishment, including detention, all of which I considered deserved. Men who were stroppey [a lower-deck corruption of *abstreperous*] were also prepared to take any punishment meted out . . . The general attitude of men was that 'they could take what the navy was prepared to serve out.'²¹

In the specific instance of caning, according to Chief Petty Officer James Cox, there was an unwritten rule: "The tradition [was] you never opened your mouth. Well, I mean, if anybody was to cry or scream or anything like that . . . you were a coward. That didn't happen." When Cox was asked about his own experience of caning, twelve cuts for attempting to strike a petty officer—did it breed resentment? lower his morale? destroy his self-respect?—he replied, "I didn't think it out the way . . . Oh no, I expected it. Oh no, I wasn't severely punished. I was let off light."²² These personal recollections appear to support the revisionists who question the long-term psychological damage inflicted by corporal punishment in the navy. The old sailors see such punishment as an appropriate response to inappropriate behavior, and the ability to en-

dure and survive it without breaking down as a vindication of one's masculinity.

Former ratings spoke with diverse and seemingly contradictory voices when they told of their experiences of naval discipline. Some said: "Harsh, savage, 'ours not to reason why.'" "Extremely severe." Sometimes "cruel and sadistic and out of all proportion to the 'crime.'" "Too rigid and in many instances unfair."²³ But to others it was: "strict but generally fair." "If one did one's job and behaved, no trouble at all." "Very fair. If any well-trained naval rating was punished for stepping out of line, such as his dress, his work, responsibility, absence ashore, etc., then he certainly deserved it." "Discipline was harsh but just. If you behaved like a mule, they had a good stock of jockey that would ride you. I knew all this before and joined."²⁴

Ratings' perceptions of naval discipline were shaped by many factors: their own personalities; the captains and commanders under whom they served and who set the tone for discipline in a ship; the leadership skills (or lack of them) possessed by the ship's subordinate officers; and the type of vessel in which they served most of their time (rigidly disciplined battleships and cruisers or smaller, more informal destroyers and submarines). But among the seemingly contradictory memories an impartial observer can discover an underlying common ground shared by most sailors when they thought and spoke about discipline.

Even when their recollections of personal encounters with the navy's disciplinary system included sanctions that seemed unfair and even unjust, almost all ratings explicitly recognized that discipline—even severe and strict discipline, so long as it is neither excessive to the point of sadism nor capricious in its application—is essential to the effective performance of the naval mission; it maximizes the safety of all who go to sea in a ship; and it ensures that each sailor bears his fair share of the ship's work. One stoker, himself from a humble (but respectable) working-class background, though not from the bottom (or rough) rung of the Edwardian social order, added this class dimension: "The type of people you had joining then mostly came from the lower-educated part of the population, and if you gave people like that a free hand, you put them all together, you would have an horrible situation. You'd never have the health and comfort to sleep or the usual things that's necessary . . . You're in a port. There's leave for everybody. Men come off at night.

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CHRISTOPHER MCKEE

