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## THAT THE RE-ESTABLISHMENT OF A SEPARATE NAVIGATING LINE IN THE NAVY IS UNNECESSARY.

By Captain WILLIAM WILSON, R.N.

CAPTAIN FITZGERALD, in his paper on "The Re-establishment of a Separate Navigating Line in the Navy,"<sup>1</sup> has certainly given us all the reasons that can be adduced for what would, undoubtedly, be a retrograde step.

He gives us five arguments that were used at the time the change was made, and the work of the Master was turned over to the Lieutenant for navigating duties.

He criticizes these arguments, and propounds the following question:—

"Is the navigation and pilotage of Her Majesty's ships a matter of sufficient importance to justify the maintenance of a separate navigating branch, if experience teaches us that the highest practical skill in this art is unattainable without the special devotion of an ordinary man's talents to the study of the theory and practice of it?"

He does not consider the re-introduction of the Masters' line practicable, but he insists very strongly on the necessity of specialists for navigation, and, with this end in view, submits a solution of the difficulty.

I propose to offer a few remarks on the five arguments quoted by him, so far as they are of importance at the present time, to endeavour to show that his proposal would not attract the best of the young men, only those among the seniors who were failures, and those too late in life for them to succeed as navigators; and that the present system will, if the Lieutenants employed for navigating duties get their fair share of promotion, give us just the specialists he so strongly insists on.

Argument No. 1. "That every executive Officer should be able to navigate a ship."

It is difficult to say whether the watch-keeping Lieutenants of to-day know more navigation than those of the past; my opinion is that they do; it is, and must always remain, a matter of opinion. There are, however, many Officers who, as Sub-Lieutenants or Junior Lieutenants, have been employed for navigating duties, have taken up torpedo, gunnery, or the First Lieutenants' line, or, for other reasons, have dropped them. Surely the experience they have gained as navigators is by no means thrown away? They are available if the navigator is sick, or for consultation when a knotty point has to be

<sup>1</sup> The "Journal of the Royal United Service Institution," October, 1891.

decided, and they certainly make no worse gunnery or torpedo Officers now, or Captains in the future, for having done some navigating in the past.

Argument No. 2, "That the French have no navigators, and get on without them," does not seem to me to affect the matter one way or the other. No one will, I fancy, be bold enough to say that the French ships are now, or ever have been, better handled than our own; and it is not a question of merely "getting on."

Arguments Nos. 3 and 4, "That the position of the Masters was invidious," "that they could never become Admirals," and the "social question," do not, the Masters being abolished never to return, affect the present situation.

Neither is Argument No. 5, "That the Masters knew no gunnery," of vital importance. If it had been considered wise to retain the Masters, they could, as Captain FitzGerald says, have been taught gunnery without much difficulty.

Captain FitzGerald, in criticizing these five arguments, tells us a good deal about "Jacks of all trades," and "specialists;" he brings up the old story that a baker cannot be expected to be a butcher, or a tailor a shoemaker, which is in no way on all fours with the requirements of the Navy.

It is from the Lieutenants' list that we must eventually get our Captains, and especially from the specialists among the Lieutenants, that they come; if, as Captains, they are to be efficient, they must keep up their general knowledge of naval matters as well as their special knowledge of their own particular line while Lieutenants; and I see no sort of reason why they should not do so; why the torpedo and gunnery Lieutenants should not have a good general knowledge of practical navigation; in fact, with the torpedo men it is a necessity, or how are the torpedo-boats to be kept afloat? or why the navigator should not have a good practical knowledge of gunnery and torpedoes, of naval discipline, and the interior economy of a ship-of-war; his time and talents are not so taken up with his own specialism when the ship is in harbour, as she must be for a large proportion of the year, that he cannot keep himself abreast of the times in these and other matters of general importance.

The question, "Is the navigation and pilotage of Her Majesty's ships a matter of sufficient importance to justify the maintenance of a separate navigating branch, if experience teaches us that the highest practical skill in this art is unattainable without the special devotion of an ordinary man's talents to the study of the theory and practice of it?" must, undoubtedly, be answered more or less in the affirmative, that is to say, that it is of vital importance that the navigation and pilotage of our ships should be in the hands of the very best men that can be found for the work, and that, having found the best men, every inducement must be given them to continue their navigating duties as long as possible; and I maintain that our present system, if properly carried out, will give us the best men for the job, and will in the future keep them till they have given the Service the best work they are capable of as navigators.

But before considering this part of the question let us turn to Captain FitzGerald's solution of it.

He proposes "to continue to enter all alike as Naval Cadets, to the exclusion of the poor man's son, and then to make it worth the while (with money) of a certain number of Lieutenants to take up the navigating line and to stick to it for the remainder of their careers, giving up their chances of becoming Captains and Admirals."

He wishes to "endeavour to attract into the navigating line the Lieutenants who at ten or twelve years' standing and thirty-six years of age are still keeping watch." He says, "they should be induced to make it the business of their lives, to take it up at any time, either as Sub-Lieutenants or Lieutenants."

Now what Sub-Lieutenant or young Lieutenant will believe that he will be watch-keeping at the age of thirty-six? If he is any good at all he is cock-sure he will be a Commander by that time, and probably thinks he has a good chance of being a Captain; when he has been ten years a Lieutenant, if not clever enough to have gone in for gunnery or torpedo, or smart enough for any Captain to take him as First Lieutenant, in short, if an unsuccessful man, he may see things from a different point of view, and be glad enough to take refuge in the navigating ranks.

But are our lamented, trustworthy old Masters to be replaced by unsuccessful Lieutenants, and are they to take up their navigating duties after they are thirty? Hardly, if our ships are to be handled as they have been heretofore!

It is true that many men in the old days did not become Masters till they were thirty, but as Second Masters they had been navigators of gunboats, or had assisted the Master of a big ship, and taken his place when the necessity arose, thus gaining much experience these elderly Lieutenants would be without.

Of course some young men would be caught by the bait, but they would not be the best, but the impecunious or those who wished for easy billets, for a navigator with no other duty in these days of fast steam passages, would often have a very easy billet indeed. And why should a young man, with perhaps a father at his back and an allowance, give up his chance, or what he probably considers his certainty, of promotion, with its accompanying increase of pay, for an increase without the promotion?

Let us now apply Captain FitzGerald's solution to the gunnery men; does he or any one else believe that, however large pay were offered to Lieutenants without prospect of promotion to take up gunnery duties, the result would be satisfactory; that the clever, smart, young men who have received early promotion for examinations, and who now come forward for gunnery, would have anything to do with it; or that the energy and talent which has brought naval gunnery to the high pitch of perfection it now enjoys would have ever been turned to that science by large pay alone?

And yet it is quite as important that the best men should be drawn to the navigating line as it is that they should to the gunnery department.

It is the chance of early promotion from the Staff appointments that has made so many of our best men gunnery Lieutenants, and it will be by giving promotion only, that the best men will be persuaded to take up navigation, and not by taking it away and offering money in its place.

There is underlying this matter a great truth to which Captain FitzGerald does not allude, "That a really good navigator is born and not made," that is to say, that certain qualities are necessary for success in this line, that are by no means to be found in every Officer who joins the Navy. Strong nerve, a capability for taking endless trouble, powers of observation, and decision of character are some of them; and whether a man possess these qualities can only be ascertained by practical experience at sea. One man takes a pride and a pleasure in making his port under adverse circumstances without more delay than is reasonable, while another is miserable and fidgety when it is too thick to make the lights at their usual distance, merely from want of nerve and lack of confidence in himself. If you have a good supply of the first sort, you may with advantage allow the second to turn their attention to some other work, and give up the navigating. But this was just what with the Masters you could not do; once started in the Masters' line a man had no option, he must go on navigating, however constitutionally unfitted for the work, or leave the Service.

Of course we know that the majority of the Masters were extremely good men, but in the nature of things there must have been a minority who were not good, and never could become good, navigators; and yet, till the inevitable catastrophe came, there was no choice but to give the navigation of Her Majesty's ships to their care, even in cases where their inefficiency must have been known, though by some good luck they had never committed themselves.

This is not so now; a Lieutenant (N) who does not show any aptitude for his duties, can, either at his own request, or by the representation of his Captain, be simply not appointed for navigating again; he may take up gunnery or torpedo—his having failed as one sort of specialist is no reason he should not succeed in another line—or he may become a hewer of wood and drawer of water and end his days in the Coastguard, and it is much better for every one concerned that he should end even thus, than by losing a ship, and perhaps many valuable lives.

It must not be forgotten that the art of navigation has been much altered, and in some ways simplified, by the introduction of powerful steamers. Passages are now made at a high speed, which tends to minimize errors due to tides and currents; they are also made in much less time than formerly, so that the opportunities of rating chronometers are more frequent; the dangers of a lee shore practically do not now exist, and if a ship gets into a tight place she may very well, with the help of her engines, get out of it again.

A sailing vessel after a two or three days' gale was often many miles out of her reckoning, and nothing but long experience in many gales availed to estimate this error with anything approaching accu-

may; now it is only very heavy and exceptional weather that will prevent our fast cruisers and first-class ironclads from making good way on their course, and the mere navigation of a ship from one port to another is consequently simplified, and may well be done satisfactorily by an Officer of less experience than was once necessary. On the other hand, the high speed at which ships travel, especially if they happen to be in a hurry, calls for unceasing and untiring vigilance and nerve on the part of the navigator of to-day; there is often no time now for consideration or consultation, the decision must be made at the moment, or disaster follows; and this will especially apply to any naval action that may be fought in the future, when a mistake may well lead to your giving a friend the benefit of your ram instead of an enemy. In the sailing days, if one liner fouled another no great harm was done; a few spars came down by the run and were smartly shifted, a boat or two was, perhaps, totally disabled, one ship lost her figure-head and the other part of her bulwarks; but nothing was likely to happen that would send either into harbour, or prevent them going into action. Now, one touch of the tremendous forging our ships carry at their bows, if it does not send a friend to the bottom outright, will certainly necessitate his making a long stay in a dockyard. This seems to point to the conclusion that the quality of nerve is even more necessary in the navigator of to-day than it was in the Master of the past.

Now it is, I believe, generally admitted that an ordinary man's nerve is not likely to improve after a certain age; the age will vary with the man, and with the life he has led, but I should say that on the average a man's nerve will begin to decline between the ages of forty-five and fifty. I do not of course mean to say that there are not many men whose nerve is not undeniable long after fifty; but I do say, that most men after a long harassing night on deck in the wet and cold, when coming up Channel in thick weather, will not be quite so ready to go fast through a narrow passage they are not well acquainted with at the age of sixty as they would have been at the age of forty; and I am inclined to think that we should not endeavour to make our navigators serve after the age of fifty if it can be avoided.

I have no wish to deny that in theory every Lieutenant is liable to be called upon to do navigating work, but I do deny that practically the theory is carried into effect, except in cases of Sub-Lieutenants and Junior Lieutenants, or that Officers take up navigating in a haphazard way among a variety of other jobs. One Sub-Lieutenant's capacities for navigating are likely to be pretty much the same as another's; we have the Hydrographer's word for it that these young Officers do not come to grief oftener than their seniors; if they do not take to the job, or it to them, they drop out of it; if on the other hand they succeed, they continue to be appointed to one ship after another for navigating duties, and I really cannot see why they should not become quite as efficient as the Masters were before them.

<sup>1</sup> See "Navigation and Pilotage of H.M. Ships," "R.U.S.I. Journal," May, 1891.

All that is required to keep up a constant supply of promising young men is that those now navigating should get the same share of promotion that other specialists do, and that they should also succeed to the appointments, such as Queen's Harbour Masterships and the command of certain yachts, now held by Staff Captains.

At least one Lieutenant of eleven or twelve years' seniority who has served as navigator from the time he left the College should be selected for promotion to Commander in each year,<sup>1</sup> the remainder taking their chance with their fellows. As Commanders, the offer of early employment for navigating duties is not likely to be refused, and those who go on navigating in that rank should receive the same treatment in matters of promotion as men who continue to serve as second in command till they are posted.

The prejudice against the navigator being senior to the executive Officer is fast dying out. This state of things, once thought so deplorable, obtains on board more than thirty of Her Majesty's ships now in commission; if any grave objection to it had transpired, it would hardly be allowed to this extent. For two years under a former Commander-in-Chief in the Mediterranean, the Commander for navigating duties of the flag-ship was the senior of the two. I have yet to learn that it was in any way "inconvenient or detrimental to the interests of the Service."

Let us now take a case, which, if the concessions I have mentioned in the matter of promotion are made, may very well be a true one. Mr. A., Sub-Lieutenant, gets five firsts and is promoted at twenty; he is clever, smart, and hard-working, and determined to rise to the top of the tree, or as near it as his own unaided endeavours will take him; he has observed that several Lieutenants (N) have lately been promoted young, feels that he has more of a turn for navigation than for torpedo or gunnery, and, on application, is appointed navigator of a small craft. He takes this appointment confidently, for he knows that, if on trial the navigation does not suit him, he can give it up, and, by virtue of his good record for examinations, will have no difficulty in getting into either the "Excellent" or "Vernon." He, however, likes the navigating, and after paying off the small craft, goes to a third-class cruiser, after a commission there to a first-class cruiser; he is now beginning to be known as a capable and rising young Officer, the Captain of this cruiser is a man of some influence, and when our friend is nearly nine years' standing gets him appointed to the flag-ship commissioning for Australia or the Cape; there he does as well as he has in his former ships, and at twelve years' seniority and when thirty-two years old he, in consequence of the representations of his Admiral, gets the navigators' promotion to Commander for the year. He has no difficulty in getting employment as navigating Commander of a battle-ship shortly after his promotion, and a second commission, either as navigator, or in command, makes him a Captain at thirty-nine, and, as the lists stand at present, he will in time be a full Admiral.

<sup>1</sup> Surely one vacancy a year is not too much to ask for the navigators.



It is true we lose this Officer's services as a navigator somewhat early in life, just in fact when we should like to keep them, but we must put up with that; it is an exceptional case that will occur seldom, for it is by their seeing that the navigating line may, with good luck and ability, lead to the top of the tree that the best of our young Officers will be induced to join it and make it their speciality, and I hold by that only.

There will, of course, between the case of this most successful Officer and that of the young duffer who cannot do the job, and drops back to watch-keeping, be a number with all sorts and varieties of success and failure.

B. did not get five firsts, was twenty-four when made a Lieutenant, and got the navigator's promotion the year after A. at the age of thirty-six; he will certainly serve every day of his Commander's time as a navigator, as six months one way or the other in his next step may make all the difference in the matter of his flag. As he was navigating a gunboat for three years as a Sub-Lieutenant, we shall have had about nineteen years' work out of him before he is posted.

C. represents the large majority of Lieutenants (N) who get neither five firsts nor special promotion, and do not become Commanders till thirty-nine, or perhaps older. As things are at present, C. will try and get into the Coastguard as soon as he can, but only because there is a customary limit to the age at which Captains are made, which precludes his hoping for that step.

Now I advocate that age being advanced in the case of navigating Commanders. Why should not C. serve till he is forty-seven or forty-eight and then be made a Captain and appointed Queen's Harbour-Master? He will be very glad to do so if he has the chance, and as he will have given the country the benefit of some twenty-eight years' service as a navigator, he will deserve the step, and the appointment. In this case as in others, for one that gets the reward, several will serve without getting it, and not only shall we keep our experienced men serving as navigators, but by the length of time they serve, they will reduce the number of men it is necessary to make navigators in each year, giving us fewer to provide for in the end and a better opportunity for eliminating the unsuitable.

Finally, I trust I have shown that Captain FitzGerald's plan would not attract the best of the young men, but only those who were either impecunious or sought a soft billet; that those of the older men who were caught by it would be, as a rule, the failures, and that they would take to navigating too late in life to make a success of it.

I advocate one Lieutenant (N) being specially promoted in each year; Commanders (N) who navigate in that rank being treated in the matter of promotion on the same lines as men in the same rank who serve as second in command, and the advancement of the customary age limit for making Captains, in the case of those Officers who are qualified to hold Queen's Harbour-Masterships; and I trust I have shown that, if these concessions are made to the navigators, their line will become as popular with the best of our young men as gunnery or torpedo now is, giving us a large choice among those best

suited to the work; and that the majority of them will continue to navigate our ships as long as it is advisable they should do so.

I am not concerned either to defend or criticize the action taken by distinguished Officers in the past in abolishing the Masters. I have already given one good reason for the step, namely, the impossibility of getting rid of the failures, except by retiring them, or turning them out of the Service. It has always seemed to me that the people in an invidious position were the Lieutenants; was it reasonable, when we were straining every nerve and sparing neither money nor trouble to give them the best of educations, that we should keep up a separate branch of Officers to do their work? I am sure many of them felt this, and, as far as I remember, the change was at the time a popular one, at any rate with the younger men among the executives, for this reason.

Now the Masters are fast passing away, it is only natural we should regret them; we never know the worth of a possession till we lose or are losing it; they filled a place in the Service that can never be filled in the same way again. Not only were they often the Captain's confidential advisers, but also the youngsters'; there are few of us who have not to thank a Master for a good turn of some sort; how often has the kindly advice and steady example of the Master helped a young fellow to resist the temptation that would drag him to destruction; indeed most of us know cases where, but for the influence of one of the Masters' line, a whole mess might well have come to utter ruin. By all means let us regret the loss of our old friends; we cannot bring them back, any more than we can bring back the masts, the sails, the wooden ships, and all the beauty, romance, and poetry of the Service of the past; they are fast passing from our sight, and we, the Officers of the transition stage of the Navy, must soon follow, to be succeeded in our turn by another generation, to whom masts, sails, and Masters will be only a tradition. May these coming men have strength and spirit, when the time of trial comes, so to bear themselves that the shades of these old Masters, to whose skill and seamanship so many of the triumphs of our glorious Service in the past were due, may be proud of their successors' gallant deeds.