

THIS YEAR MARKS THE 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE PUBLICATION

Challenger: the Life of a Survey Ship

With this publication, the author – George Stephen Ritchie, founder and first editor of this column – marked himself as a noted maritime historian and, particularly, a historian of the art and science of hydrographic surveying. Admiral, then Captain Ritchie had been the next-to-last skipper of the second ship of the name *Challenger* and, following its decommissioning, wrote this biography of a survey ship. Some of the most lyrical passages from this work describe the period during his command. As a tribute to Admiral Ritchie and his service to our profession and the science of the sea, it is well worthwhile to share a few passages with those of you who never had the good fortune to come across this book.

From August 1950 till November 1951, Admiral Ritchie safely guided the second *Challenger* through a hurricane-infested Atlantic, on into the Caribbean, through the Panama Canal and into the broad Pacific Ocean. While in the Pacific, he surveyed from New Zealand waters to the Aleutians, from British Columbia to jewel-like atolls of the western Pacific. And along the way, he garnered the prized plumb of the deepest depth in the ocean when his ship discovered the Challenger Deep in the Mariana Trench.

Here are a few of the literary gems from this early work of Steve Ritchie:

“Few ships were ever seen upon the voyages *Challenger* made in the course of her search for knowledge of the seafloor; she was guided by the shape of the seabed rather than the trade routes.

“The moon rising above the horizon like a ship on fire; the stars so bright on a calm tropic night that silver threads ran beneath them over the dark sea; the green flash from the setting sun; the windrows and the calm unaccountable swathes upon the surface of the sea when a gentle breeze begins after a calm; the great fleets of *Verellas*, pale white and blue, their sails set, and all sailing purposefully before the Trades; the dolphins racing before the ship’s stem one above the other, turning upon their backs to show their white bellies in pure ecstasy of enjoyment; the steady, relentless progress of a giant swell generated by a distant storm, passing across the surface of the sea; golden rafts of algae being the species *Trichosmium*, recognisable under the microscope as a neat little bundle of sticks: these are things one has time to regard and time to ponder on when passing unhurried across the face of the ocean.”

It was not all fair-weather sailing on this voyage. While off Bermuda in late August 1950, the *Challenger* was in harm’s way with a series of hurricanes. In one instance, “The seas were very high as the ship steamed slowly into them, playing for time. The small party on the bridge gazed upwards with awe at the oncoming wavetops towering above them: some said the waves were 60 feet high, some 70...” The *Challenger* was also no stranger to the great extra-tropical cyclones of the Pacific as Ritchie recounts: “... But the course was northwards for Adak, a US Naval Base in the Aleutians, and after a week or so the weather grew more stormy daily until the ship passed through the chain of the Aleutian Islands in a gale of great ferocity, cold northerly winds shrieking in the rigging and over the top of the bridge where the Officer of the Watch huddled in his corner and peered over the windbreak at the cold white scene of countless breaking seas joined by wind-blown streaks of foam, which stretched away on either hand to the snow-covered mountains of rugged aspect. Two or three black-footed Albatross, still attendant upon the ship, were sweeping across this landscape like leaves in the gale, the only dark-coloured objects in a grey-white scene.”

But, like all true sailors, what Steve Ritchie remembered most of this epic voyage was the ship “far out on the Pacific, a blue dome of sky above, great depths beneath, a white speck in an empty world. It is the forenoon onboard and the lifebeat of the vessel’s pulse comes from below as her engines push her ahead through the long low swell; other sounds come racing back, the gentle flap flap of the bridge awning in the breeze, the shrill of the boatswain’s call and the song of a sun-tanned seaman at work on deck. And smells, too, are there – freshly applied paint, tarred hemp and the tang of navy rum, which pervades the little ship at noon. The cook is in his gleaming galley, serving out the dinners, his white chef’s hat above a beaded brow; the quartermaster, stripped to the waste, stands at the wheel; the navigator is taking his midday sights upon the bridge; while on either bow flying-fish skim away from the oncoming vessel.”

These words ring true and bring back our own memories of places surveyed, calm and stormy days at sea, old friends and shipmates. This is what Admiral Ritchie brought to us all during his years as editor of ‘As It Was’, his years of service in the Hydrographic Service of the British Navy and his years of service to the International Hydrographic Bureau. His words have also brought us pride in our profession, pride in its accomplishments, and pride in the men and women who have helped make us who we are. It is hoped that this column can continue in that tradition.

