

Money Changing by Derek Smith

Of all the jobs Writers were required to do during my time, especially when deployed overseas, the task of changing the Ship's Company's Australian money into the local currency was the most traumatic. Of course, it was - and is very necessary to enable the ship to retain its Australian Currency without having to replenish cash through the mails or by diplomatic bag - or whatever.

I am unaware of the present arrangements for ensuring sailors have money for a run ashore in a foreign port, when all personnel are paid by electronic transfers into their Bank Accounts and no actual cash changes hands each payday. In my era, Officers and Sailors were paid their entitlements (after tax, DFRB, allotments etc) to the nearest ten shillings, with the minor balances carried forward in their Pay Card to the next pay period. Sailors could then buy from the Canteen or bank into a bankbook account, their cash with the Supply Officer, who was an agent of the Commonwealth Bank.

Thus, all Australian notes on board would, in theory, eventually return to the Supply Officer who would transfer non-public moneys to public moneys and account for every penny.

When we were due to enter a foreign Port - Let us choose Hong Kong as a good example - The SO would ascertain the Official Exchange rate Australian pounds vs Hong Kong dollars. The senior Writer sailor would then compile a local money change form which required the Killick of the Mess to group his mess on the form.

Each sailor would have to decide how much local currency he wanted to buy and the Writers would have to work out the equivalent in local dollars, making sure there were no mistakes and reconciling each form, then the total number of forms. His overriding task was to ensure that public moneys did not make a loss on the transactions. At the same time he was told that any profit had to be kept to the very minimum, with whatever profit was unavoidable, being paid into the Ship's Fund.

Readers should remember that ships had no computers or electronic calculators, spreadsheets had not been invented. If a ship was lucky, it had a mechanical adding machine with a handle on the side which was capable only of adding a column of figures fed into it individually. Etched into my memory is the official exchange rate for Hong Kong and for Singapore in the early 60's ie before decimal currency in Australia:-

1 Hong Kong dollar = A1s 6.80635d, 1 Singapore dollar = A3s 2.34547d.

So, we had to do our calculations by long multiplication and long division. Somehow we were successful, mostly in a very short time. Very seldom did we have a problem later discovered.

Then, following a paper reconciliation, the Supply Officer had to write a Bill of Exchange on the Commonwealth Government for the sum of local currency

required and in the bill denominations required to 'put up' each mess member's requirements. Off he would go as soon as alongside, or in the first boat, to the branch of the local government bank, exchange the bill for local notes - usually grubby, smelly, disgusting bits of coloured paper which, in some cases looked as they had been secreted in unmentionable places.

Then we would put up each mess' requirements in the office, with frequent dips of fingers into sponge bowls filled with dettol and with watchkeepers from the 'hole' hammering on the door, because they wanted to get ashore to the nearest pub to quench their thirst.

Unfortunately, they had to wait until the last note was used to ensure that a mistake had not been made somewhere along the line.

Sound familiar??? Pity the poor Writers - but nobody did!!