

NERVAL'S DIARY

Le voyageur enthousiaste observe ...

London, Thursday, May 17, 2001

Dowling Club Meeting aboard *HMS Belfast*

This was a very special occasion. The festive orator was Major General David Joliffe who caused me to attend in the first place, because I have known him for many years from his time in Hongkong. And military dermatologists of such calibre are rare (I don't know of any other high-ranking colleague since the demise of Marion B. Sulzberger). The venue, a British man-of-war of World War II vintage moored between the London and Tower Bridges in Central London, held another strong attraction for me enhanced by my personal history.

The *HMS Belfast* is a 11,500-ton cruiser, at the time the largest of the Royal Navy, launched by Mrs. Neville Chamberlain on St. Patrick's Day in 1936, commissioned on August 5, 1939. I had seen her from either bank of the Thames River upon previous visits, and given the nautical interests in the family (e.g. 'Nerval Diaries' in *Dermatology* 1996;192:45 and 2000;201:384), she had always reminded me of her battle history. In particular, her role in sinking the *Scharnhorst* (31,000-ton German battleship) on Boxing Day 1943 was in my mind. Incidentally, my late father, on leave from the Russian Theatre in the summer of 1943, had built me a plywood model, 1:200 scale, of the sister vessel, the *Gneisenau* (which I still treasure). Consequently, when the *Scharnhorst* was sunk, this was an event that stuck to my boyish mind at the time. Later in World War II, the *HMS Belfast* was active on D Day, when, at early dawn, her 6.5-inch barrels pounded the German positions above the *Sword* and *Juno Beaches* in Normandy. Still later, she served in the Korean Campaign, sailed Far Eastern and African waters, to pay off in Devonport in 1963, when her admiral's flag was lowered for the last time. On Trafalgar Day in 1971, she was opened to the public in London where she still sits (web-site: www.iwm.org.uk/belfast).

Being too early at appointments all my life, I arrived aboard ship well ahead of the cocktails and had the fortunate chance to be allowed to see whatever I wanted: the admiral's seat, the captain's position, the turrets (with video explanation), the 50-kg shells fired into a 23-km distance during battle, the signal station, the cabins, berths, etc. A fascinating and welcome enrichment of previous

visits and sights I had of men-of-war around the globe, e.g. in the US Navy Dockyard at Washington, D.C., during an AAD Meeting some years ago (with the Findlay's of Eastbourne), of a World War II *Kitty Hawk* in Charleston Harbor or the most modern *Kitty Hawk*, by chance, in Colombo, Sri Lanka, sometime in the late seventies.

Major General Joliffe's talk was entitled 'Military Medicine: An Inside View'. He gave a most interesting and revealing presentation of British activities during the Gulf War, in Kosovo and in West Africa recently, richly illustrated with slides depicting both injuries and equipment of such task forces. No world war is necessary to keep military medicine in action. A proud record for the British anyway.

Toasting to the Dowling Club members – where I have been a honorary member for many years, and, as was my impression, the only foreigner attending and the oldest participant at that – I gave a toast to the 40-strong audience. I related to my first coming to London right after the coronation of Queen Elizabeth in 1953 and again in 1954, with my then girl-friend Christine, by now my wife of 41 years. Before the second visit in that year of 1954, she had become temporarily disenchanted with me which made me profoundly unhappy in turn, and I wanted to go abroad. Austria had no army then, the 'Légion étrangère' was no temptation to me so I wrote to the Naval Office in London, with a query as to the admittance to the Royal Navy (I was 18). They replied that only sons of British-born parents were considered. Alas, this was the beginning and the end of my naval career and I did not become an admiral but a professor (smiles in the audience). Nevertheless, in this summer of 1954 in the student's camp in Fridaybridge near Ely, a friendship began with a British age-mate who made a real naval career, who also was from Eastbourne.

Food and wines were excellent, the weather very British, the night understandably short, and the flight out was from Stansted at 6.40 h, a departure which required a taxi from the Nelson Dock to Liverpool Station and the first train out of there. On the other hand, I was back at my desk in Vienna before noon.

A delightful 30-hour interlude, admittedly a bit exhausting.

à bientôt,

K.H., Vienna

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