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First out: This is a handed down story from someone who served in HMCS Magnificent repeated as told to me back in the late 1980s. It never actually appeared in the column, more because of its length than anything else. (It's actually a short story). It did appear in a British magazine in 1989. Be aware, the dialogue would be considered politically incorrect in this century and I have, in fact, cleaned it up to get rid of the most egregious bits. That said, the dialogue fits the era.

Lieutenant Byron Emsfield Clarke, Royal Navy, knew who Ferdinand de Lesseps was and understood that great Frenchman's place in history. Clarke might have even liked the man, though Lieutenant Clarke was rather conservative and de Lesseps had been a somewhat flamboyant individual. Ferdinand was also a rather big thinker. In fact, Ferdinand liked big ditches; ditches big enough in which to float large ships.

It was Ferdinand de Lesseps' obsession with large, long bodies of water that was the original cause of a rather precarious problem which had involved Lt. Clarke. You see, Lt. Clarke lay in a hospital bed in Port Said, Egypt, the northern port of one of Ferdinand's massive bodies of water – the Suez Canal.

It is doubtful that Byron Clarke actually blamed de Lesseps for his situation. He more probably thought, in a passing sort of way, of Gamal Abdel Nasser. In fact he had referred to Nasser as a nasty wog in more than one conversation.

Gamal Abdel Nasser, President of Egypt, was something of a nationalist. He was also extremely impatient. Had he simply waited another thirteen years, he probably could have taken control of the Suez Canal without so much as a whimper out of the major European Powers. Instead, he did something rather foolish and, in the Fall of 1956 decided that the Suez Canal should belong exclusively to Egypt, thus nationalizing it – without the previous owners' permission.

Britain did not concur. They decided to take it back – by force.

War was still very much in the minds of the Western world. It had been eleven years since the end of World War II, and Korea had ended in a stalemate only two years ago. Britain was unwilling to allow an upstart Egyptian push them around. Other countries, particularly the members of The British Commonwealth, were worried that this latest incident would evolve into yet another war of major proportions. There were national decisions made and resources were quickly made available to assist Britain in stabilizing the situation.

Canada jumped in with both feet – and an aircraft carrier full of military equipment.

HMCS MAGNIFICENT was Canada's only active aircraft carrier in 1956. She was in fact, a British-built light fleet carrier of the Colossus class. When Nasser decided that the Suez Canal was the rightful property of his country, "MAGGIE", as she was known by the sailors of the Royal Canadian Navy was loaded up with every- thing but the kitchen sink and aircraft. Instead she transported trucks and supplies in an emergency sea-lift into the Mediterranean.

Lt. Byron Clarke, RN, lay fuming in his sterile hospital ward thinking most of all about MAGNIFICENT. If there was blame for his presence in the British Army Field Hospital Port Said, Byron Clarke felt the Canadians should, before anyone else, assume it.

Clarke didn't dislike Canadians. He just felt that a country which was known to produce singing lumberjacks and dog trainers probably didn't have the skill and finesse necessary to operate a complicated ship like an aircraft carrier. In other words, Clarke had an attitude Canadians didn't really care for. One in which he tended to look down his nose at colonials. Clarke had convinced himself that he did not possess such an attitude. He had to. He had been assigned as liaison officer to assist in the unloading of MAGNIFICENT in Port Said, thus, with a reasonable command of Arabic, he became the interface between two peoples he really did not understand; Canadians and Egyptians. And it is what happened between a very few of those two peoples that was giving Lt. Clarke a permanent view of the cracked and peeling ceiling.

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Lt. Clarke found Canadian sailors rather a rough lot. They did not seem to possess the discipline bred into British seamen and their respect for authority seemed to be non-existent. While this bothered him, he was amazed by the fact that their ship was in incredibly good condition and they operated it with the skill and confidence he had thought reserved for his own Royal Navy.

Ralph Hambly was one of the Canadians who Clarke saw rather often. He was constantly on the Flight Deck in view of everybody and he seemed to have a control over his work party that others did not. Had anyone asked Ralph he would have told them that it was because he was a prairie boy, and everybody knew prairie boys made the best sailors. Ralph was, in fact, from Eston, Saskatchewan, a small town where his father had been involved in raising hogs. Ralph hated hogs almost as much as he had hated school, so when his seventeenth birthday came along, Ralph immediately packed an overnight bag and headed for the RCN recruiting office in Regina. The only time he looked back was when he had to return home to get his father's signature on the recruiting form. That he acquired with the lie that he would serve a three year engagement and return to the farm to take over the family business. Four years had passed since then.

Ralph had completed his initial engagement and despite the problems that went along with life in the navy, he had decided it was something in which he excelled and most of the time enjoyed. If asked to explain why, he was lost for a decent answer. Ralph was drafted to HMCS MAGNIFICENT in April of 1956 with a group of aircraft handlers having just completed his AH2 course at the Naval Air Station, HMCS SHEARWATER. He was a senior Able Seaman in his branch and was considered a most reliable hand by both his Petty Officer and the Flight Deck Officer. He was also held in high regard by many of the ordinary seamen onboard. Now he was in Port Said with little to occupy his time and no aircraft, so he had been placed in charge of a small body of men whose primary function was to marshal trucks to a dispersal point on the Flight Deck and rig them for their disembarkation to the jetty below.

Ralph liked what he could see of Port Said. Although the ship had spent her entire time working since arrival, Ralph thought this looked like the kind of place he might find one of those rough little bars with cheap local beer, a few women and perhaps a black market that sold gems, gold

and other things sailors were supposed to be able to get their hands on. He didn't have a great love for the Egyptians having spent the last thirty or so hours trying to deal with them on the jetty, but as long as he could get a good deal ashore, the trip might not be a total waste.

The work party took a short break. Ralph went over to the Port side and jumped into one of the anti-aircraft gun sponsons. This was a tub built just slightly below the Flight Deck level of the ship, extended over the side and which contained a 40 millimeter, rapid fire gun. Below were the "bum-boats" which seemed to make an appearance whenever the ship was in one of the less well developed countries.

A bum-boat is the sailor's name for a small skiff or punt operated by a local entrepreneur who finds the sale of goods to members of a warship's company or the passengers of a merchant liner lucrative enough to feed his inevitable large family. The wares are often cheap, locally produced items or brand-name stuff of questionable ownership. Bum-boat operators were not likely to be the most honest persons with whom one might wish to conduct business. They were always poorly dressed and rowed a boat which looked like one more day of operation would see it to the bottom of the harbour for want of caulking. A naval chaplain had called them God's children slightly more in need of assistance than others; sailors called them "creatures of questionable parental heritage".

Ralph lit a cigarette and noticed one of the bum-boats pulling closer to the ship's side. The vendor was looking up at him with a wide grin, waving a gold watch. Ralph developed an interest.

The bum-boat came a little closer and Ralph called down to it, "Hey! C'mere wiggy! Let's see what y've got." The vendor came right up to the ship's side and waved the watch in the direction of Ralph, almost eighty feet above him.

Ralph couldn't quite see the watch but called down, "How much?!" The vendor babbled something in Arabic and held up seven fingers. This confused Ralph but he decided to carry on with the negotiations for a little longer in hopes of getting a good deal. "Pounds!" Ralph hollered. "How many pounds?"

"Siben," replied the Egyptian, holding up seven fingers and grinning as he offered his product to the sailor at a special discount price.

"Bull," muttered Ralph to himself and held up two fingers as he yelled, "Two! I'll give ya two!"

Some of Ralph's work party had joined him in the sponson and watched the barter with the knowing smiles of men who had engaged in this form of trade before. Canadians were famous for it. The Egyptian wildly shook his head and held up seven fingers, furiously waving them in the direction of the sponson. "Siben, siben!" he shouted.

"No way, wiggy," said Ralph. "Two!"

The game of barter is not very delicate but there are some unwritten rules. The first, and perhaps most important, is that neither party should show weakness. There must be some resolve in each party's negotiations. There is an agreed upon price, somewhere in middle ground, but it is only attainable if the correct attitude is displayed by both the seller and the prospective buyer. This is achieved by the seller taking the approach that the buyer is extremely cheap and the product can be sold to the next person that comes along for the initially quoted price, and by the buyer displaying a certain indifference to the goods offered. If the price is low enough a deal can be struck.

Ralph and the Egyptian were both playing their parts well and Ralph had decided he would not budge on his price until the Egyptian made the first move. If the little salesman rowed away, he would soon be back offering a discount.

The Egyptian must have wanted to make a sale because he weakened sufficiently to maintain Ralph's interest. "Six. You gib me six."

"Little wretch," Ralph commented to the men who had joined him. Then to the Egyptian, "Two. I'll give you two!" The Egyptian once again shook his head "no" and held up six fingers, his face having assumed the disgusted look so often seen on vendors dealing with people from strange lands. Ralph laughed. "Hey! Wiggy!" The Egyptian looked up and Ralph held up three fingers, his face filled with optimism and friendship.

The Egyptian spat, looked away and disdainfully held up five fingers. Ralph indicated "no". The Egyptian threw his hand out in Ralph's direction and looked away pretending to ignore him. Ralph snickered and told his men, "This guy is good".

"Hey! Arab! Give ya four!"

That clinched it. Although the Egyptian hesitated slightly, Ralph knew he had hit upon the price at which the little bum-boat operator would turn over the watch. The Egyptian smiled and nodded his head favourably.

"Send string! Send string!" said the excited little man.

"Get me a hunk of codline," Ralph directed one of the ordinary seaman in the sponson, and to the Egyptian, "You wait! You wait! OK?!"

He nodded and replied, "Ok, ok."

A few minutes later the ordinary seaman had returned with a length of codline and Ralph lowered one end into the bum-boat. The Egyptian wrapped the watch in a grubby piece of cloth and tied it onto the line, indicating that Ralph could hoist it up. When the end of the line reached the sponson and Ralph had a look at the watch, he was a little put off. The device was made of a cheap metal, the face poorly crafted and, as one of the ordinary seamen present had stated, it probably had a bamboo mainspring. Ralph decided it would be best if he just returned the thing

to the bum-boat and didn't bother with it at all. He looked down at the boat and said, "Cheap! I don't want it! You keep!"

The Egyptian got angry and weighed in with a string of blasphemy which Ralph neither understood nor cared about as he started lowering the watch in the grubby little cloth. Had he taken a few more seconds to tie a better knot, the remainder of the day would have been relatively uneventful. As it was however, the little piece of cloth opened up and the watch tumbled into the water, sinking immediately. Ralph waved it off.

The Egyptian exploded.

Within minutes there were more than twenty boats alongside "Maggie", all their occupants screeching in Arabic and shaking their fists in the direction of the sponson. Ralph decided that being out of sight might be the best way to avoid any further incident and began to leave the scene.

Lieutenant Clarke had watched the proceeding in its entirety from the Starboard side near the Island, a considerable distance away. He strode over to the sponson as Hambly was leaving, stopped him and asked, "Right then. What's going on here?" Ralph Hambly hated "kippers", as Britons were referred to in the RCN. He didn't have a reason; it was simply the thing to do. The fact that Byron Clarke was one, coupled with the fact that he was an officer, caused Hambly to take on a look of considerable contempt. As far as Clarke was concerned, this was typical of Canadians and he reacted in kind.

"What have you started here?" he asked.

"Nothin', Sir. The little gizzet-merchant is just raisin' hell, that's all."

Clarke became stern. "I'd say that's not all, man. They all seem rather upset. In fact they're all saying you owe one of them some money."

"No sir," replied Hambly. Hambly told the story of the barter and the loss of the watch. He might have been able to end it there had he not added, "... it's between me and the wog."

"We'll see about that!" Clarke answered, and then proceeded to rattle off in Arabic at the bum-boats. The reply came from the vendor with whom Ralph had been bartering.

"What's your name?" Clarke asked Hambly. Hambly told him.

"Well, Able Seaman Hambly, it appears you owe that man seven Egyptian pounds for a watch you received from him. Now, I would suggest you pay before this mob get violent and starts something we can't handle."

"But...", started Hambly.

"No buts, Hambly! Pay him!"

Ralph Hambly seethed. First the Egyptian and now this kipper officer. His mind turned over as he quickly developed a way to deal with this problem.

“I don’t have any money on me right now, Sir. I’ll have to go down to my mess to get it.”

“Very well. I’ll tell him. But I warn you, Hambly, if you don’t return in due course and pay this man, I’ll have you up in front of the Commander as a defaulter.”

Hambly nodded with a solemnness. “Aye aye, Sir. I’ll be back as soon as I’ve got my money out of my locker.”

Clarke once again spoke to the bum-boats in Arabic. They quieted down and Clarke reiterated his warning to Hambly. Hambly acted extremely humble and nodded some form of agreement. As he left to go to his messdeck, he grabbed one of the ordinary seamen, a huge man who was relatively well-known in the fleet as a very successful boxer. Hambly thought to himself that this man would be strong enough to assist him in making things right.

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The cable deck of a light fleet aircraft carrier was one of those spaces in the ship which men avoided. It was a rather unpleasant smelling compartment, darkened by various shades of grey paint and a splatter of red-lead here and there. There was a light coat of dust on everything in the ill lighted compartment and rust chips from the main component. Two large greased strips led from the forward end to the door at the aft bulkhead. The deck was pierced by two reinforced holes through which passed the massive anchor cables stowed in piles in the cable locker on the deck below. The two great anchor chains bent their way aft, over a gypsy winch and then forward through the hawse pipes where they met the giant 250 hundredweight anchors.

The cable deck was the storage area for other fittings related to the job of anchoring or mooring the ship. There was one item which interested Ralph Hambly. The joining shackle. The joining shackle looked like any shackle one might pick up from a hardware store. The only noticeable difference was the size. The joining shackle weighed just in excess of a hundred pounds. Its purpose was to hold the leviathan that was MAGNIFICENT to a buoy using the anchor cable.

Ralph Hambly, assisted by his ordinary seaman, shifted the joining shackle to the grease strip which led to the door, then the two of them commenced sliding the huge fitting down the deck. It was anything but an easy job. Every time the two men came to a door, they had to lift the shackle over the sill which, in almost every ship, could be as high as a foot. Within fifteen minutes they had the big fitting at the foot of a ladder leading to the flight deck. The move up the ladder took them several more minutes and an extraordinary amount of expletives.

Once on the flight deck, the job seemed to go easier. There was no problem with being intercepted by a Petty Officer or some other such person. After all, two sailors struggling with a large naval fitting was a fairly common thing in an aircraft carrier. They dragged the shackle across the flight deck, into the 40 millimeter gun sponson. The two men lugged the monster onto

the top of the ready-use ammunition locker which was flush with the top lip of the sponson tub bulwarks. Hambly greased the top of the locker with some of the graphite grease from the maintenance locker in the sponson.

He looked out at the bum-boats again. There's the little bastard, he thought to himself. He called to the bum-boat. The little Egyptian rowed over to the ship's side.

"I've got your money, wiggy!"

The Egyptian looked up with a glitter of teeth.

"Come a little closer," instructed Hambly. The Egyptian complied until he was directly under the sponson. Hambly started lowering a thin bit of line with a brass bolt on the end. When it reached the boat the Egyptian exploded into a tirade of Arabic. He had not received the payment promised.

Hambly looked down with glee then started inching the Joining Shackle toward the edge of the sponson. "Here's your pay!" screamed Hambly, and with a final shove the hundred pound naval shackle slipped over the edge of the gun platform and executed a perfect vertical drop.

The little boat could just barely hold its occupant and his wares. The shackle was simply too much for the old, poorly constructed vessel. It entered the boat and departed at approximately the same speed, via the bottom planks, causing the boat to sink with an alarming speed. The vendors in the remaining bum-boats rescued their comrade and started to raise a din.

Lieutenant Byron Emsfield Clarke had been witness to the final part of the episode from Hambly's final cry to the pushing of the joining shackle over the side. He might well have taken a different course of action if he had realized that he was unable to prevent the damage the shackle would do. Running in the direction of the gun sponson was simply a reflex action – it was also what put him in the hospital.

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Byron Clarke looked at his leg and almost cried. The pain had long since subsided, but the memories of being run down by the giant aircraft mule (a tractor designed to tow aircraft), were still very vivid.

If only Hambly hadn't been one of those pig-headed Canadians; If only the Egyptians were advanced enough that bum-boats weren't a way of life; If only Gamal Abdel Nasser hadn't tried to take something that wasn't his; and, if only Ferdinand de Lesseps hadn't dug that damned canal at Suez.