

Book Reviews

**Adams, Thomas A. *Dictionary of Royal Fleet Auxiliary ships from 1905*
Whittles Publishing, 2025**

440 pp., illustrations

ISBN 9781849955751 (softcover) £35.00

Thomas Adams has produced an excellent reference book regarding the British Royal Fleet Auxiliary (RFA) ships from 1905 to the present day; it is obvious this has been a labour of love, and it will certainly become the “go-to” reference book for the history of the RFA.

For those not familiar with the RFA, it began in 1905 as the fleet of support ships for Britain’s Royal Navy (RN) bringing the “bullets, beans and black oil” to wherever RN warships were operating. Additionally, the RFA vessels included amphibious support ships (such landing ship dock/heavy), hospital ships, refrigerated stores vessels, scientific research ships, salvage vessels, forward repair ships, and tugs. The ships were, and still are, crewed by merchant mariners and followed the warships into battle, thus suffering the same wartime conditions and losses as their RN counterparts. In many respects the RFA is similar to the US Military Sealift Command.

In the past the RFA merchant mariners came from countries of the former British Empire. Often the officers were British, Australian, Canadian, New Zealanders, or South Africans. The deck department, engine room crew (the black gang), and cooks and stewards came from nations across the British Empire. Indians from the sub-continent filled many of the engine room and deck department roles while many Asian seafarers, mainly from Hong Kong, were cooks and stewards. British citizens now operate the vessels.

World War I saw the RFA operating around the globe. One of the more obscure vessels was RFA *City of Oxford* that was a kite balloon ship serving with the Dover Patrol spotting German warships movements off the Belgian coast. It was later converted to a seaplane carrier and sent to the Red

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Sea. Another was RFA *Perthshire* that operated as the “dummy” battleship HMS *Vanguard*; it was based at Loch Ewe to confuse German spies and reconnaissance aircraft. A number of RFA ships were lost to enemy action during the war.

During the inter-war years, RFA vessels operated around the globe during the golden years of the British Empire. One of the lesser-known vessels was the tanker *Montenol*, supporting RN warships operating off the Spanish coast during the Spanish Civil War. *Montenol* was later lost during World War II when it was sunk some 140 miles east of the Azores on 21 May 1942 when torpedoed by U-159. Its crew attempted to save the vessel, but *Montenol* sank the following day.

During World War II, the RFA operated across the globe providing vital logistics and maintenance supporting to the RN in the Atlantic, Mediterranean, Indian Ocean, and later in the Pacific in 1945. The tanker *Olwen* served in the South Atlantic in 1939 supporting the RN’s hunt for the German battleship *Graf Spee* that was eventually trapped in the River Plate and scuttled by her crew. In 1944 the tanker *Bishopdale* was deployed to support Australian and US Navy ships in liberating the Philippines. The tanker was struck by a Japanese kamikaze aircraft with three of the ship’s company killed. Good damage control saved the ship and *Bishopdale* went on to serve in the RFA until 1970 when it was scrapped.

Another ship (or ships) of note was the hospital ship RFA *Maine* of which there were four vessels bearing the same name (1905–1914, 1914–1916, 1921–1947, and 1947–1954). There was to be a fifth *Maine* but even though the keel was laid 1951, the project was cancelled in 1952 as an austerity measure and due to the lack of steel in Britain after World War II. The RFA frequently re-used ship names, which can be a little confusing as to which ship did what and when – hence this book is an excellent source of data for the historian and researcher.

The post-World War II era saw the RN continuing to operate around the globe and the RFA taking an active part in operations off the Chinese coast during the Chinese Civil War, the Korean War, the Malayan Emergency, the 1956 Suez crisis, and the Indonesia Confrontation. Many British colonies achieved independence after 1945 and the RN and RFA were busy assisting with the smooth transition of responsible government.

Several RFA ships saw service in various roles during the Falklands War of 1982 including landing ship logistics, such as RFA *Sir Galahad*, which transported the Welsh Guards to the war zone. On 8 June 1982, Argentine aircraft bombed the ship in San Carlos Water, killing 43 soldiers and five of the ship’s crew with many more wounded. The ship caught fire and was

abandoned and burned for several days. The hard decision was made to sink the vessel, and it was towed out to sea on 25 June and sunk by a torpedo fired by the submarine HMS *Onyx*. Those who died onboard are still with the ship.

It was not only enemy forces that the RFA had to contend with. In early June 1970, the tanker RFA *Ennerdale* was lost when it struck an uncharted granite pinnacle in the Indian Ocean. The crew of 62 were rescued by the frigate HMS *Andromeda* and RFA *Tideflow*; *Ennerdale* could not be salvaged and was broken up by explosive charges. In 2017–2018 a new batch of *Tide*-class vessels were laid down, now double-hulled to comply with International Maritime Organisation protocols. These new tankers have served across the globe including supporting RN ships in recent operations in the Arabian Gulf and Indian Ocean.

The RN is still a global navy despite what some detractors might claim. From personal experience gained while working in Singapore, the frequent visits of RN warships was notable, as was the work of RFA *Diligence* (Forward Repair Ship) which was somewhat unfairly named the “Sembawang guard ship” as it was always in port awaiting the arrival of RN vessels needing maintenance, overhaul, and repair.

Overall, this is a very well-written book with extensive photos and line drawings of the various ships. While it is a niche “market item,” the dictionary is well worth the read. The RN is well known around the globe but without the logistics support of the RFA, the warships would struggle to stay at sea.

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**Antony, Robert J. *Outlaws of the Sea: Maritime Piracy in Modern China*.
Royal Asiatic Society Hong Kong Studies Series
Hong Kong University Press, 2025**

xv + 251 pp., illustrations, chronology, maps, tables, bibliography, notes,
glossary, index

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This work is a history of aspects of piracy on the southern coast of China from the 17th to mid-20th centuries. The geographic focus is Guangzhou, including historical Canton, Hong Kong, and Macau. The author wonders what it would be like to be a pirate: “Let the Pirates speak.” He fixes our time in the post-truth era and points out the limitations of formal sources. “We must fall back on novel methodologies, intuition, and imagination” (1). A chronology frames the events in the history of China and Vietnam. In the Introduction, pirate voices