

THE CUSTOMS AND TRADITIONS OF A

TARANTO NIGHT

MESS DINNER

A FLEET AIR ARM CELEBRATION

Taranto Night is the Fleet Air Arm's annual celebration of the Battle of Taranto on the night of 11 November 1940. Dedicated to the 'Men of Taranto' and celebrated around the world in Her Majesty's Ships and Royal Naval Air Stations, the evening is a traditional, if distinctively boisterous, Naval Mess Dinner, during which all present thoroughly enjoy themselves!

THE SPEECHES

The President of the Dinner this evening is Rear Admiral Tom Cunningham CBE, Chairman of the Fly Navy Heritage Trust. As soon as everyone is seated, the single bang of the President's gavel for Grace signals that Dinner has officially begun. The President and Guest Speaker traditionally give rousing speeches about the historical significance of Taranto which are accompanied by much banging of tables in agreement.

RULES OF ORDER

Rules of Order apply throughout the Dinner and misbehaviour or breaking the rules generally results in disciplinary action. The President can order the culprit to leave the mess, fine him a number of drinks or give him a chance to exonerate himself by the use of his wits. Fines vary from a single drink to drinks for all present. Taranto Night is renowned for high jinks, with pianos often being blown up, and officers' mess bills taking a hammering!

PASSING THE PORT

Passing the Port is an important Naval tradition. When the last course has finished and the tables cleared, the President bangs the gavel for silence and calls for the second Grace. The stoppers are then removed from the Port decanters and the Port is passed. The Port is always passed to the left. Port decanters are passed by sliding them along the table and they are only lifted to pour for the person on your left.

THE LOYAL TOAST

The Loyal Toast is traditionally given to toast the reigning monarch. For Naval Officers it is customary to remain seated during the Loyal Toast. The tradition dates back to Tudor times when standing up to drink a toast onboard a ship-of-the-line invariably meant bumping your head on the low beams. Charles II is reported to have said "I'll see that my naval officers run no such risk, for I will allow them from henceforth to remain sitting when drinking my health."

THE 'SKIT'

The traditional historical vignette of the Battle of Taranto is the highlight of the evening. Winston Churchill described Taranto as a 'Glorious Episode' and the short humorous sketch which involves Swordfish aircraft descending on wires suspended from the ceiling, diving in to attack cardboard cut-out ships - is usually just that! Accompanied by loud thunder flashes, anti-aircraft fire and copious amounts of smoke it serves as an inspiring reminder of the indomitable spirit of the Fleet Air Arm epitomised by a small band of young naval aviators 80 years ago.

11 NOVEMBER 1940

