



A research note on the history of ships, places, organisations and events associated with the
Royal Fleet Auxiliary (RFA)

The origins of the RFA – a cold case review

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Introduction

Today the Royal Navy is officially described as comprising of five arms – Surface Fleet, Fleet Air Arm, Submarine Service, Royal Marines and Royal Fleet Auxiliary (RFA).

In the autumn 1990 I wrote a paper exploring '*The Origins of the Royal Fleet Auxiliary*'. This was based on our perceived wisdom of the time and attempted to review a subject that had floated in unclear waters for nearly a century.

In the decades since writing that paper further material facts have been uncovered in The National Archives at Kew. Material that provides further insight surrounding the origins of the Royal Fleet Auxiliary and this has necessitated this 'cold case review'.

Despite much official PR literature to the contrary, it is not the case that a Royal Charter or Royal Warrant established the RFA as a Service. There is no evidence of HM The King's consent having been sought to use the term 'Royal'. It is also not the case that it was established by the Order-in-Council of March 1911.

It all evolves from an earlier Admiralty creation – the **Fleet Coaling Service** and need to maintain economic manning of ships that visit foreign ports. During the course of World War One '**Coaling**' evolved into the **Fleet Fuelling Service**. A term used in annual Naval Estimates and that continued to be employed until the early 1950s when official documents still referred to RFA tankers building 'for the Fleet Fuelling Service'.

1. Royal Fleet Auxiliary, its origin

In the historiography of the RFA the **Admiralty Circular Letter Number 9 of 3 August 1905** is celebrated as the beginning of the RFA Service.

This was distributed to all Commander-in-Chief, Captains, Commanders, Commanding Officers of HM Ships and Vessels. However, it is an enduring myth that this letter *creates the RFA Service*. What it actually does is introduce and define the term **Royal Fleet Auxiliary**.

Official policy papers leading to this decision are elusive. A recently uncovered file dated 3 June 1905 entitled '*Suggested titles for MAINE, AQUARIUS and PETROLEUM*' was opened by the Director of Transports for referral to Naval Law, Admiralty Secretary, Fourth Sea Lord, Second Sea Lord and First Sea Lord. Particular reference to PETROLEUM indicates that when she is registered and manned with a mercantile crew on passing of the Government Ships Bill great care should take not to address her as HMS. Nonetheless, it remained unclear how to address her and this set off a chain of policy correspondence with suggestions, such as, 'Admiralty Oil Ship', 'Admiralty Store Ship' or the simple generic term 'Admiralty Ship'.

Final agreement materialised in a minute of 3rd July 1905, that appears to have been approved by Fourth Sea Lord on 20th June, recommends distinguishing between Admiralty owned and Admiralty chartered vessels. Initially proposing the term **Royal Naval Fleet Auxiliaries** and the abbreviation **RNFA**. The term 'Naval'



was struck out and the abbreviation RNFA replaced by **RFA**.

To date, this is the first known use of the style **Royal Fleet Auxiliary**, and the abbreviation **RFA**. On 14 July 1905 the Director of Transports submitted a draft circular letter for Fourth Sea Lord's approval. Fourth Sea Lord's signing off was dated 17 July 1905, with approval to print and distribute 1,200 copies dated 19 July. It is unclear why the Circular Letter omitted the 'self-propelled' element. A Stores Circular signed by Secretary to the Board, dated 30 December 1905 issued the first formal instructions to RFAs on stores accounting and demanding.

So Circular Letter No 9 T3487/1905 issued to the Fleet on 3rd August is the foundation stone of the style **Royal Fleet Auxiliary** and the prefix **RFA**. Slowly the term began to appear in Admiralty documents and from 1908 begins to appear regularly in Admiralty Transport Department papers.

In 1905 the first vessels to don this new '**RFA**' style were the Hospital Ship MAINE (1), the Distilling Ship AQUARIUS ¹, naval store carrier INDUSTRY (1) and two vessels of the Fleet Coaling Service – the collier KHARKI and the oil tank vessel PETROLUEM.

¹ Built as steam collier HAMPSTEAD; 1903 purchased by Admiralty, modified for use as a distilling ship and renamed as HM Distilling Ship AQUARIUS; 1905 styled RFA, 1906 converted at Pembroke Dock to a combined repair/distilling ship and commissioned under the White Ensign as HMS AQUARIUS.

What is unclear, and remains so, is why this term was not applied to all Admiralty owned civilian-crewed auxiliaries, such as, the Naval Armament Vessels and Admiralty Cable Ships. All were paid for out of Crown funds and serving under the same Admiralty flag for non-commissioned vessels – the **Blue Ensign** defaced by the horizontal anchor ².

At the commencement of World War One this distinction between Royal and Mercantile Fleet Auxiliaries was re-emphasised within King's Regulations and Admiralty Instructions.

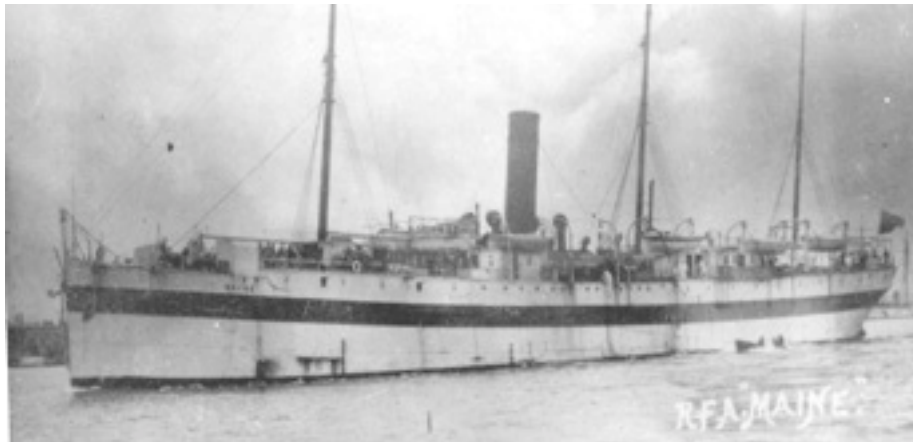
Just over two decades later a refinement came in a **House of Commons** debate on 17 November 1937. The First Lord of the Admiralty was asked "*who is responsible for the direction and control of the Royal Fleet Auxiliaries?*" The reply was concise – '*The Director of Stores is responsible to the Board of Admiralty for the direction and control of the Royal Fleet Auxiliaries*'.

Again in the early days of World War Two an Admiralty Fleet Order (No 402 of 1940) re-emphasised the designation of RFA vessels. Referring to King's Regulations and Admiralty Instructions (article 30) it says merchant ships chartered or requisitioned for service with the fleet are often incorrectly described as RFAs. It confirms the status as:

² Naval Armament Vessels worn a 'special' Blue Ensign until 1922 when Admiralty Fleet Order instructed them to wear the Admiralty Blue Ensign.



'Fleet auxiliaries owned by the Admiralty and manned by them are styled as **Royal Fleet Auxiliaries** and those taken up on charter are Mercantile Fleet Auxiliaries. The description RFA is restricted to vessels that are both owned and manned by the Admiralty with mercantile crews.'



RFA MAINE (1), hospital ship, with her distinctive white hull and prominent Green Band. The painting up of prominent Red Crosses on the hull and funnel was not approved until World War One. [author's collection]

3 June 1905

The title 'R. M. S.' should never be employed in connection with these auxiliaries whether owned by the Gov. or taken up on freight. I propose that the title used for these vessels should be as follows & that the initial letters be employed in telegraphic & other communication where brevity is req^d.

1. All auxiliaries owned by the Admiralty to be styled "Royal Fleet Auxiliaries" R.F.A. ~~R.M.S.~~
2. Other vessels taken up on charter for the use of the Admiralty or Fleet to be styled "Mercantile Fleet Auxiliaries" M.F.A.

the above titles to apply to all vessels that are self propelled. A Memorandum might be issued to the Fleet if the above is approved.

20/6/05
Concur with 4th Sea Lord
CCD
21/6/05
approve N VTO

First use of 'Royal Fleet Auxiliary' in handwritten minute by the Fourth Sea Lord 20 June 1905. Source TNA Kew MT23/249



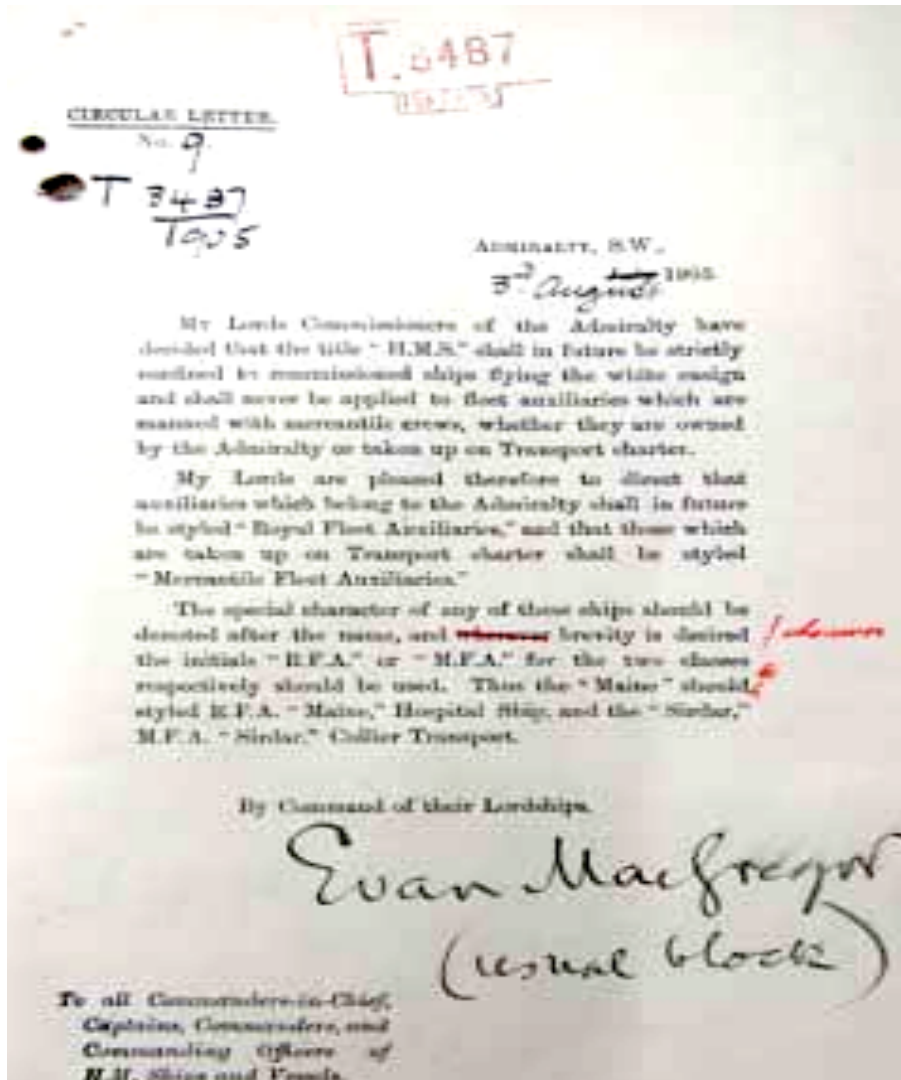
2. Government Ships as Merchant Ships

A ship to which the **Merchant Shipping Act** (MSA) applies must be the property of a British subject. For the purposes of the MSA His Majesty the King was not a British subject and Crown law officers concluded that 'certain' ships that were the property of the Crown could therefore not be registered as merchant ships and on the other hand could not be brought under the **Naval Discipline Act** (NDA) unless manned by the Royal Navy under the White Ensign. As a consequence of this, for example, the hospital ship MAINE and the distilling ship AQUARIUS – both civilian manned Government ships that did not form part of the Royal Navy – were able only to enter British ports abroad and not foreign ports. Although according the Hansard when these vessels visited foreign ports they has been put under a commissioned officer and subject to the NDA.

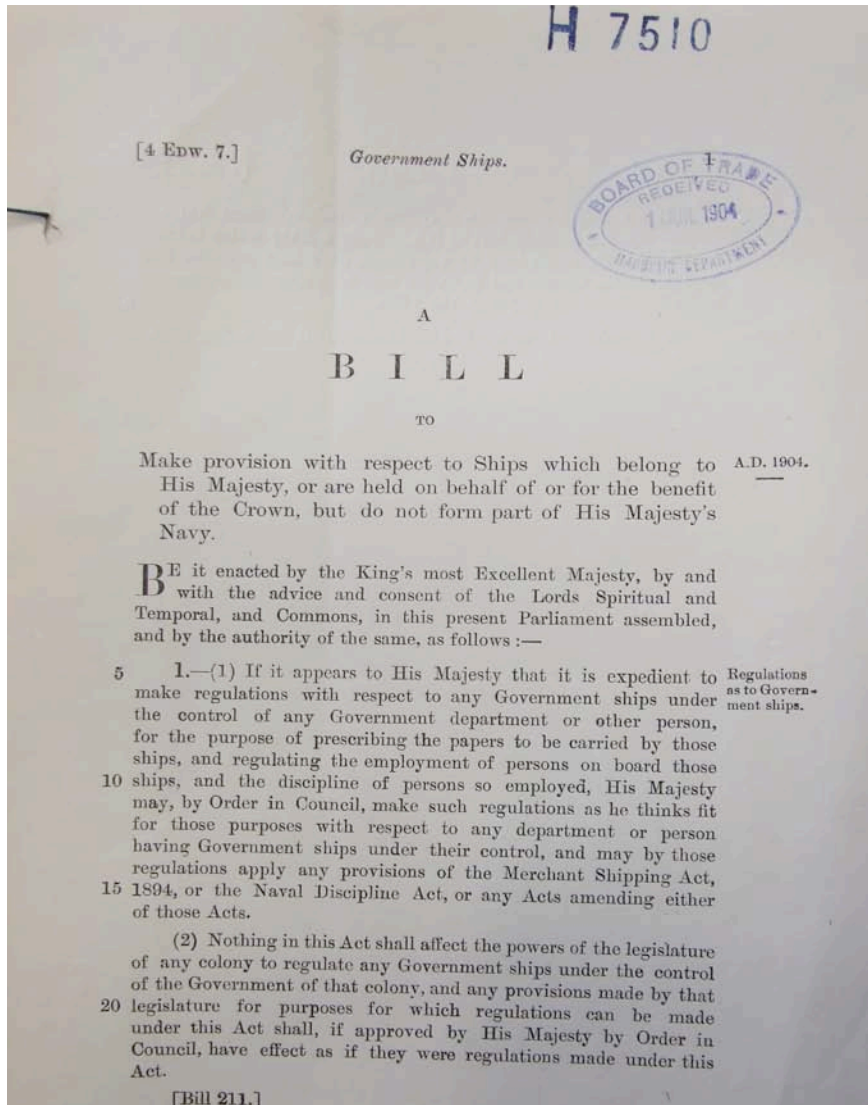
A solution was sought in the shape of **The Government Ships Bill 1905**. Explained in Hansard (House of Commons 1st March 1905) as 'To make provision with respect to Ships which belong to His Majesty, or are held on behalf of or for the benefit of the Crown, but do not form part of His Majesty's Navy'.

During the Second Reading of this Bill in May 1905 it materialised that the Admiralty's objective were:

- to give the Crown the same privileges that were conferred upon British shipowners by the MSA;
- to ensure that every ship flying the British flag is furnished with proper papers;



The printer's proof of Circular Letter No 9, August 1905.
Source TNA Kew MT23/249



Government Ships, A Bill, 18 May 1904 (extract). Source TNA Kew MT10/912

(c) that proper regulations might be made for the discipline of men on board by applying the provisions of the NDA; and

(d) a matter of economy by avoiding the necessity of employing costly naval ratings in Government ships which were now manned by civilians.

Despite the support of the Attorney-General there was much dissatisfaction in Parliament on making of laws and applying the NDA to civilian manned ships, by the Admiralty using an Order-in-Council. Members accused the Government of wanting the House to vote on this Bill in the dark and that difficulties which had arisen in the past leading to their policy for this Bill has been exaggerated. It was broadly and unsatisfactorily seen as a Bill enabling men engaged by the Admiralty or other Government Departments in civil employment being brought under the NDA.

A few days after the debate The Secretary to the Admiralty said that since the debate and objections the Admiralty had come to the conclusion that there was no necessity to put the crews of these vessels under the NDA at all, except in case of war. The Admiralty proposed only to take power to apply all or any of the provision of the MSA, and also to make regulations for one purpose only, to which the MSA was not applicable – to provide these ships with proper crews. On 9th August 1905 the Government Ships Bill was withdrawn!

Following this withdrawal the policy evolved into an Act introduced by David Lloyd George (President of the Board of Trade) to amend the Merchant Shipping Acts 1894 to 1900. Called the **Merchant Shipping Act 1906** with



Section 80 – Power to register Government ships under the Merchant Shipping Acts³ – providing provision for regulations to be made by Order-in-Council to enable government ships to be registered as British Merchant Ships. The Admiralty convened an inter-departmental conference in 1907. This appears to have held 15 meetings involving the Board of Trade, Treasury Solicitor and Junior Counsel for the Admiralty in a range of detail. A draft Order, at the time called a ‘memorial’, appeared in 1907. In 1908 when Naval Law asked for clarification of the nature of agreements with officers and men crewing RFAs they received an answer that revealed the complexity of the subject. For example, RFAs PETROLEUM and KHARKI originally on 6 month Mercantile Marine agreements – strictly an agreement between the Masters and their officers and ratings. The Masters being appointed separately by the Admiralty (Director of Transports) or by a Senior Royal Naval Officer. By 1908 both these vessels were on ‘Dockyard agreements’ administered by the Director of Stores. From January

³ The term Government Ships was taken to mean ships not forming part of His Majesty Navy that belong to His Majesty, or are held by any person on behalf of or for the benefit of the Crown, and for that reason cannot be registered under the principal Act. His Majesty may by Order-in-Council make regulations with respect to the manner in which Government Ships may be registered as British ships for the purpose of the Merchant Shipping Acts.

1908 the hospital ship RFA MAINE was crewed by Maltese ratings on a 6-month Board of Trade Foreign Going Agreement. This was largely for voyages between Malta and UK. Here again her Master exercised his authority under a letter of appointment from the Admiralty.

All of this finally led to the **Order-in-Council 121 of 22 March 1911** – Merchant Shipping – Registration of Ships – Government Ships not of Royal Navy. This was an interesting Order that exempted ‘Government ships in the service of the Admiralty and registered within the provisions of this Order’ from the need to comply with a range of provisions made under the 1894 Merchant Shipping Act and from whole Acts, such as Merchant Shipping Act 1897, the Pilotage Act, Liability of Shipowners Act and sections of the 1906 Merchant Shipping Act.

Over the past century some have claimed that this is ‘the Royal Charter creating or incorporating the RFA Service’. Another historical myth, as this Order makes no direct reference to ‘Royal Fleet Auxiliaries’, rather it is a legal device enabling registration, within the framework of the Merchant Shipping Acts, of Admiralty vessels as British Registered Merchant Ships. What is confusing is that on 24 March, in correspondence on the preparation of instructions to its Surveyors the Board of Trade Marine Department actually says: *‘The accompanying copies of an Order-in-Council under Section 80 of the Merchant Shipping Act 1906 respecting the registry of Government ships controlled by the Admiralty are forwarded for the information of the Surveyors. This order applies to Royal fleet auxiliaries (sic) such as oil-carriers, hospital ships*



and other vessels not forming part of His Majesty's Navy...'.⁴

As a result of this, upon registration Admiralty-owned ships were recorded as Crown vessels – the property of 'His Majesty represented by the Commissioners for executing the Office of Lord High Admiral of the United Kingdom' with the managing owner designated as 'The Secretary to the Admiralty, Whitehall SW1'.

Irrespective of the many exemptions to the Merchant Shipping Acts, it became and still is administrative policy that RFAs would apply Board of Trade (and its successors) regulations and its officers would be qualified to Merchant Navy standards and the hold the relevant certificates of competency.

Although amended slightly during both World Wars this Order-in-Council stood firm until the 1980s when a 'change-of-status' (also known as 'deregistration') was enacted by Statutory Instrument (SI) 1991 of 1989. Interestingly this SI like the previous Order-in-Council makes no direct reference to 'Royal Fleet Auxiliaries'.

Inexplicitly it was 1913 before the term Royal Fleet Auxiliary appears in the Navy List but individual ships were not specifically identified as such until some decades later⁴.

⁴ **The Navy List** – up to and including **1912** vessels were recorded under '*List of Fleet Auxiliaries, also of small Steam Vessels, Tugs etc, employed on Harbour Service*'. In early **1913** this was retitled as '*List of Royal Fleet Auxiliaries, also of small Steam Vessels, Tugs etc, employed on Harbour Service*'. By December 1913 the Navy List introduced the term 'oiler'

3. Why 'fleet auxiliaries'?

Over the centuries Britain developed and expanded her maritime trading and expeditionary activities, and with such expansion came the need for a positive form of protection. In the 16th and 17th centuries came the creation of this, in the form of ships built and developed for the primary purpose of war fighting.

By the mid-19th century Great Britain was the global economic, military and political power. Control of the oceans, and, with it control of maritime trade, was a pillar of the British Empire. From London the Lloyd's shipping insurance and banking syndicates set the terms of maritime trade. The Royal Navy policed the major sea-lanes and provided the trade protection.

This protection could not have been provided without logistical support principally in the form of non-commissioned support ships, collectively known as

and ship's Masters were being named. **Post World War One** the list was retitled as '*List of Stores Ships, Admiralty Trawlers and Drifters and Royal Fleet Auxiliaries also of Small Steam Vessels, Tugs etc employed on Harbour Service*' and restructured to include names of ship's Masters, Chief Officers and Chief Engineers. *Hospital Ships* were list separately. **1940** seen the list retitled and restructured as '*List of Stores Ships and Royal Fleet Auxiliaries*'. Details include the names of Masters, Chief Officers, Chief Engineers and 2nd Engineers. For the first time individual ships were identified as RFAs. *Hospital Ships* were list separately.



'auxiliaries'. Vessels, such as, store ships, victuallers and transports employed freighting stocks and replenishments of powder and shot, timbers, canvas, cordage, victuals and fresh water. Vessels supported the Western Squadron of Cornwallis and Jervis off Brest keeping the French Fleet safely blockaded. Vessels supported the demands of the fleets, in the Black Sea and the Baltic, during the Crimean War.

These were merchantmen, prizes and even decommissioned warships no longer considered fit for fighting. Vessels that were largely civilian crewed, and were mainly taken up on charter. This emergence of fleet auxiliaries was a key denominator in naval power and led to an Order-in-Council of 9 July 1864. This laid down that mercantile-crewed auxiliaries would be recognised by wearing the **Blue Ensign** suitably defaced by the Admiralty Badge or a Departmental Seal ⁵.

⁵ Admiralty Blue Ensign – the ensign used in the running head of this research note illustrates that worn by all Admiralty-owned auxiliary vessels, including RFAs until the introduction to the Fleet of the RFA's own ensign in 1969.

4. The Fleet Coaling Service

The 19th century seen many technical innovations inextricably linked to industrial developments such as steam engines and screw propulsion. Driven fiercely by the drive for profit the mercantile community were pioneers in the field of marine engineering. The Admiralty was slow to see the advantages of steam. The first steam-driven fighting ship of the Royal Navy, HMS COMET, was launched in 1822. Steam harnessed a source of power that was independent of the wind, that made it easier for ships to move throughout the Empire, but in doing so consumed vast quantities of fuel – coal.

The Admiralty had an established chain of bases where fighting squadrons could operate from and return to for crew R&R and to receive ship maintenance and resupply. Within this infrastructure of bases they established coaling stations. In March 1892 a report in the New York Times described this British chain as "*an enormous system under splendid control*". The Admiralty's **Director of Contracts** was responsible for the purchase of coal and from 1862 until reorganisation in 1900 had responsibility for transporting it.

Coal had introduced into the world of naval logistics a commodity that was heavy, dirty, relatively dangerous, time and labour consuming – that of 'coaling ship'. For example, the rate of coaling from a collier alongside was totally dependent upon the equipment available on the collier, the quality of its crew and available local labour. Maintaining this worldwide storage of coal chain was expensive and the Admiralty were constantly



reviewing the efficiency of its provision. As part of this on-going attempt to address the complexities of coaling, the Admiralty, in 1899/1900, instituted the '**Desiderata in Colliers for coaling HM Squadrons**'. Based on their perception of an 'ideal collier', the BANGARTHT, this attempted a degree of standardization by laying down information covering – length, speed, capacity, holds, hatches, derricks, winches and other fittings. Interestingly it also specified that electric light was desirable. This 'Collier Desiderata' was revised in 1902 and again in 1904-06, particularly after consultation with the various Commanders-in-Chief and the Superintending Transports Officer at Cardiff.

The 1900 reorganisation was part of a drive for efficiency savings that seen the Admiralty Transport Department, headed by the **Director of Transports**, take responsibility for all the shipping requirement of HM Government. Within this his largest task was concerned with the freighting of coal.

Fleet Coaling Service – It now appears that as part of this reorganisation a separate and distinct Naval Service was constituted – the Fleet Coaling Service. Little is known or has been written about this Service. We do know that it came under the immediate direction of the Fourth Sea Lord, and it embraced control of all coaling craft afloat, together with administrative responsibilities such as, the employment and wages of crews.

Fleet Coaling Officers were appointed to the staffs of the Commander-in-Chiefs at Portsmouth and Devonport, with the Flag Commander to the C-in-C Nore appointed as FCO for Sheerness. The Coaling Officers' duties

covered the efficient management of the supply of coal to HM Ships and control of the coaling craft and their crews. They had to liaise daily with the Naval Stores Officer, who was responsible for the stocks of coals both ashore and afloat, regarding the craft to be used and on coaling operations generally. This change of responsibility appears to have coincided with an experiment in collier ownership when the Admiralty purchased the newly built sea-going collier KHARKI.

Introduction of C-craft numbering – A Naval Stores circular, of 22 April 1902, was issued on '**Marking of Fleet Coaling Craft**'. A worldwide audit of all its craft and concluded that all coaling craft were to bear numbers prefixed by the letter '**C**'. The exception to this was that sea-going craft and hulks were to have names.

In 1904 it was further recommended, by the Director of Stores, and approved by the Admiralty to eliminate names throughout the Service for all type of coaling craft except colliers. It was also directed to renumber the whole of the Fleet Coaling Service in one consecutive series (home and overseas) commencing with '**C1**'. This came into force from 01.04.1904 when the **Fleet Coaling Service** comprised ten tugs, five floating depots, two coal hulks, twenty self-propelled miscellaneous vessels and 224 lighters. The following table is an example of deployment at HM Coaling Depots Portsmouth, Portland and Malta:



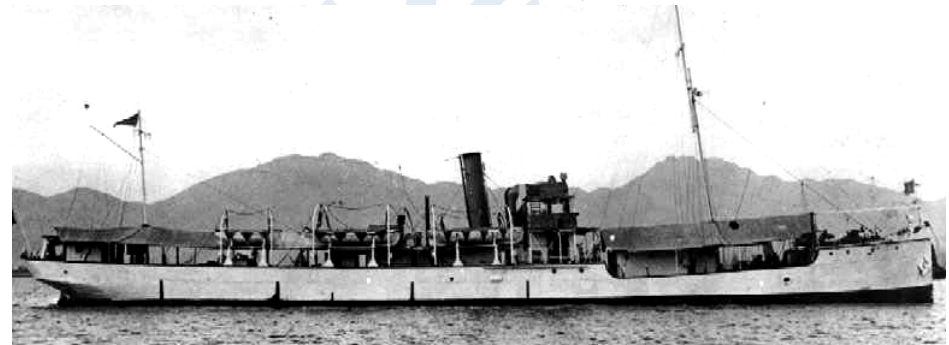
	Portsmouth	Portland	Malta
Tugs	1	1	1
Steam launches	1	1	1
Collier SS KHARKI	-	-	-
Floating depots	3	-	-
Haulabouts	8	3	-
Lighters	27	24	70
Barges	1	1	-
Oil tank vessels	3	-	-

An exception was made for sea-going colliers. They were allowed to retain their name, for example, KHARKI. The few sea-going tankers (at the time known as 'oil tank vessels') that were coming into Admiralty ownership were also permitted to carry names, for instance, PETROLUEM, ISLA.

To ensure continuity of administration within the Fleet Coaling Service, the First Sea Lord approved the appointment of a **Fleet Coaling Committee**⁶. The Coaling Budget (in traditional Civil Service terms known as Navy Vote 8/2/K) provided for the purchase of coals, oil fuel, petrol, lubricating oils, and the cost of all services connected with the supply of these stores, eg, freight, purchase and maintenance of craft and labour. This included the wages of the crews of coaling craft. The

⁶ Fleet Coaling Committee comprised Fourth Sea Lord, the Director of Contracts and the Director of Stores. The post of 'Director of Stores' was only established in 1889.

annual budget over the period 1903-06 was recorded as £1,711,000.



SS KHARKI, a collier purchased by the Admiralty, upon completion, in March 1900 for employment with the Fleet Coaling Service; 1906/07 converted for service as an 'Oil Carrying Vessel'. In January 1911 RFA KHARKI carried out oiling-at-sea trials with the destroyers HMS MOHAWK and HMS AMAZON. (author's collection)

The annual expenditure of coal for the Fleet was around 1.3 million tons. This was largely Welsh coal obtained from the principal collieries under annual contract and delivered to the South Wales loading ports, such as Cardiff, Penarth, or Barry Docks.

In February 1904 a confidential handbook '**Instruction regarding the supply of coal in war**' had been written and distributed to the Commanders-in-Chief. Strangely it was 1908 before the Admiralty purchased its first, and only, ocean-going collier – MERCEDES.



In over half a century the RFA operated a small handful of colliers – the 4,500 ton RFA MERCEDES was the only ocean-going one. (RFA Historical)

5. The change to oil fuel

The introduction of oil fuel into the Naval Service is a complex story and beyond the aim of this research note. Nevertheless, I feel it is important to summarise its introduction and importance in the evolution of the **Fleet Fuelling Service** and of **Royal Fleet Auxiliaries**.

During the 1890s the Russian and Italian Navies undertook experimental oil firing. Around the turn of the century the Admiralty began to consider its use as a marine fuel. However, up to around 1902, the Admiralty's purchase of liquid fuel was negligible, with it being limited to small quantities primarily for use with oil-fired auxiliary boilers, dynamos, heaters and lamps. There was one impediment against the Admiralty's adoption of oil fuel – Great Britain had unlimited supplies of good quality

steam coal, mined in South Wales and stockpiled around the globe.

Nonetheless, progress was the order-of-the-day and by 1903, the Royal Navy had two battleships – HMS MARS and HMS HANNIBAL – fitted with duel-firing arrangements. That is, an oil fuel burning installation in addition to their existing coal furnaces. By 1907 the D class submarines were the Navy's first diesel-powered boats. The numerous advantages of oil fuel were quickly appreciated and this permanently brought into naval logistics questions on the supply, storage and distribution of oil fuel. The expenditure of oil fuel by HM Ships had generally been restricted to quarterly passage trials and use with oil driven dynamos. The new coastal and ocean-going destroyers coming into service were all oil burning.

The 1907/08 estimated expenditure was 30,000 tons with the total Admiralty stock (January 1907) estimated at 40,000 tons. This was distributed as:

Portland	17,000	
Thameshaven	25,100	(in hired tanks)
Portsmouth	230	}
Devonport	290	} in small tank vessels
Sheerness	400	}
PETROLEUM	5,000	
KHARKI	190	

In the Admiralty was decided, as a matter of urgency, to prepare schemes for the completion of oil fuel storage for 110,000 tons. This was approximately four months



war expenditure of the 1908/09 Fleet. It was to be distributed as:

Location	Capacity (tons)
Plymouth	20,000
Medway	20,000
Portsmouth	20,000
Malta	10,000
Gibraltar	10,000
Portland	30,000

Records show that only two sea-going oil fuel tank vessels were actually owned by the Admiralty: RFA PETROLEUM with a capacity of 6,000 tons and the smaller RFA KHARKI. PETROLEUM, purchased in 1905 has the distinction of being the first tanker to be styled as a 'RFA'. With 'six holds', a deadweight of 6,670 (summer freeboard) and a 'war speed' of 10 knots. She was temporarily attached to the Atlantic Fleet, however, it was somewhat overrated when it was claimed she was 'fitted for fuelling HM Ships at sea'. KHARKI, the former collier, with her capacity for 690 tons of oil fuel and 27,000 gallons of lubricating oil, was employed only on coastal duties.

In addition to PETROLEUM and KHARKI, seven oil fuel lighters were working at the home dockyards and at Thameshaven; also three (500 tonners) were being built. However, there was no storage for **petrol** at the Admiralty depots and supply had to be arranged from commercial contractors direct to 200-ton submarine tanks being constructed at Haslar. The 1906/07 estimates of expenditure were 200,000 gallons (around 600 tons) and

the estimate for 1907/08 was double that. Negotiations were undertaken for the purchase of a tanker. With nothing suitable available on this scarce market, the small collier THISTLE was purchased and later converted to become the RFA petrol carrier ISLA. Also by 1906/07 a system of receiving and issuing lubricating oil in bulk had been set up and all important dockyards supplied oil to HM Ships from lighters.

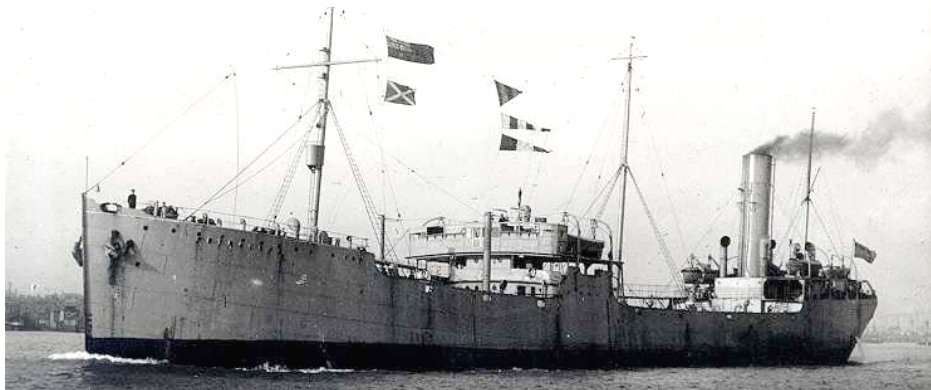
The Admiralty's **sourcing of oil** was from Burma, the USA (Texas) together with small quantities from Borneo and Scottish shale. After 1910 purchases were also made from Rumania⁷. The security of supplying oil fuel was a key aspect for naval planners and politicians. The Admiralty was being forced to rely upon a commodity supplied from foreign sources and consequently supply contracts with commercial companies, such as, Burmah Oil Company, Standard Oil Company and Aguila (Mexican Eagle) Oil Company. By 1912, also commercial shipping carried most of the Navy's oil fuel. European and American demand for 'tank steamers' was described as abnormal and freight rates as very high. Records show that the cost of freighting from Port Arthur (Texas) increased from 8/- (shillings) in 1910 to 50/6 (shillings and pence) in 1912. Concern led to the setting up of a committee under the Fourth Sea Lord. Known as the '**Admiralty Committee on the Use of Oil Fuel in the Navy**', its terms of reference aimed at investigating the

⁷ Oil had only been discovered in Persia (today known as Iran) in 1908.



maintaining of an adequate supply of oil so as to enable all new naval construction to be oil burning.

For instance, this Committee studied the financial aspects of freighting oil, based upon the Admiralty's, albeit limited, operation of RFA PETROLEUM. In its report, the Committee generally stated 'although at that time there was little difference in the cost per ton of oil freighted by the Admiralty and of that freighted commercially for them, but that it would ultimately be more cost effective for the Admiralty to 'freight its own oil'.



PETROLEUM, tanker completed in 1903 and registered to the Crown (Admiralty) in September 1905, for employment with the Fleet Coaling Service. [author's collection]

The **Royal Commission on Fuel and Engines**, chaired by Admiral of the Fleet Lord Fisher, was established. Between 1912 and 1914 it considered the

overall national problems of oil supplies, oil usage and oil storage in peacetime and wartime.

The Commission confirmed that oil had a great many advantages and economies. It had greater thermal efficiency; it required less bunker space; it could be carried in spaces on board ships that were impractical for the coal, for instance, in shallow double bottoms; it was cleaner, less smoke and with no ashes to be disposed off. It enabled speedier and physically easier fuelling and quicker production of steam. There were savings in construction costs and it permitted up to a 55 per cent reduction of stokehold personnel.

In 1910 RFAs PETROLEUM and KHARKI were described as fitted for 'oiling-at-sea' although this was certainly not underway replenishment as we know it today. In January 1911 KHARKI did carry out trials with the destroyers HM Ships MOHAWK and AMAZON. On 20 November 1911 the newly constructed BURMA undertook trials with battleship HMS AGAMEMNON.⁸

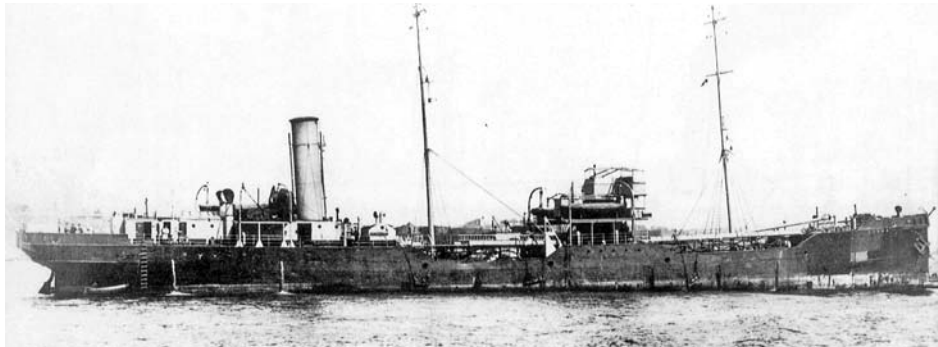
⁸ The initial '**Oiling-at-Sea**' took place in February 1906 and is reasonably documented – RFA PETROLEUM and the battleship HMS VICTORIOUS using a bulky astern rig called the '**Stirrup Method**' with water rather than oil being transferred at rates varying between 37-57 tons per hour. Further trials were undertaken up to June 1906, eg, HMS DOMINION when around 50 tons of oil fuel was transferred when underway [the first oiling-at-sea], later around 205 tons of oil was transferred to HMS COMMONWEALTH when underway. Evidence shows that everything was cumbersome, time consuming with low pumping rates and breakages.



Oil as the fuel of choice had arrived!

It is of interest to record, that in late 1913, the first Admiralty shipment of oil (6,000 tons) from the Anglo-Persian Oil Company's new Persian Gulf oil fields arrived in a Japanese tanker for discharge at Sheerness.

6. Tanker construction commences



RFA BURMA 1,382 grt, first oil tanker built for the Admiralty.
[author's collection]

Around 1908, the **Director of Stores**, John D Forsey (later Sir John), was actively raising the awareness of the Admiralty Board of their increasing use of oil and of the need to provide both storage and transport. Admiralty planners agreed on the need to increase the number of oil tank vessels they employed. The tanker trade was investigated by the Government Shipping Broker. In spite of the British merchant fleet being the world's largest the Admiralty's attempts to purchase or achieve long-term

charters on tankers proved unsuccessful⁹. Admiralty planners had little alternative but to commence a tanker construction programme.

The distinction of being the Admiralty's very first ordered and constructed sea-going tanker sits with BURMA. Built by the Greenock and Grangemouth Dockyard Co of Greenock with an engine by J & G Kincaid Ltd, Scotland. Launched in March 1911 she was steel built to classification society rules (Lloyds Register and The British Corporation). As a fleet attendant oiler she had a capacity of over 2,000 tons in 12 tanks. She was also fitted with a capability for bunkering warships alongside. Some Admiralty documents imply that she was to be registered as 'RFA BURMA' owing to a ship named BURMA already appearing in the register. However, her Certificate of Registry does not actually confirm this.

On 20 November 1911 the new built BURMA carried out oiling-at-sea trials with HMS AGAMEMNON.

Over the following five years, four additional 2,000-ton tankers – MIXOL, THERMOL, TREFOIL and TURMOIL – variations on the BURMA design – were ordered, and although considered advanced for their day the design did have unsatisfactory stability.

First motorised RFAs – at this time the Admiralty was looking hard at the use of the 'internal combustion

⁹ It is recorded that the Board of Trade maintained a list of suitable commercial tankers that could be called on in emergencies – 75 vessels in 1907? In practice some doubt has to be applied to the BoT's crystal ball.



engine' and its use for main propulsion. The reforming First Sea Lord, Admiral of the Fleet Lord Fisher, was to regard Admiralty-owned tankers as appropriate test beds for the Naval Service to gain experience with diesel engines. So it was agreed that the new build programme should be used to gain experience with 'oil engines' – testing the various designs and studying their overall economy, convenience and reliability.

In 1913, the first of a group of four 1,000-ton tankers was underway. Passingly described as 'self-propelled lighters' of shallow draught and intended for harbour service. The first was ATTENDANT and in following two years her three sisters were built – SERVITOR, CAROL and FEROL. Under initial plans all were to be propelled by varying designs of 2-stroke diesel engines. Only the latter two achieved this – being fitted with Bolinder diesel motors – thus earning the distinction of the Admiralty's first motor tankers.

An ambitious tanker design was also on the drawing board. Powered by two 8-cylinder 4-stroke diesel engines and with all electric auxiliaries – the ocean-going 8,000-ton OLYMPIA¹⁰ was laid down by Vickers of Barrow-in-Furness in July 1913. Equally the 2,000-ton TREFOIL, building at Pembroke Dock, was to have the same 4-stroke engines supplied from Vickers.

In September 1913 the Admiralty issued an invitation-to-tender for three 10,000-ton motor tankers to be built

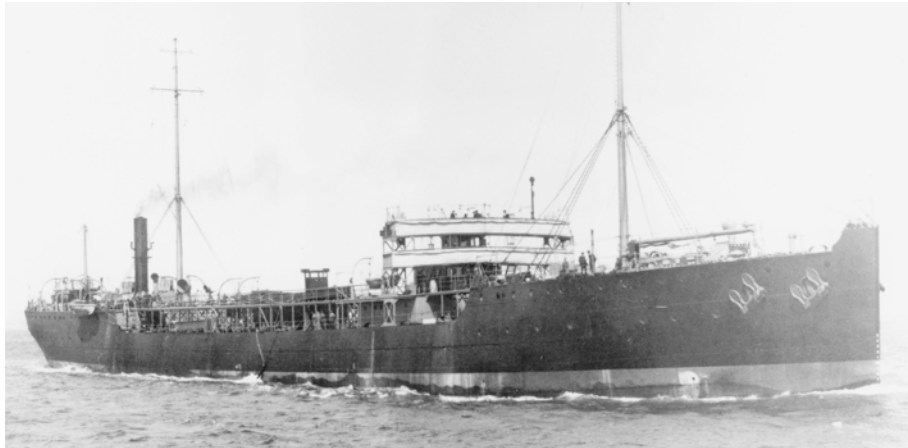
¹⁰ Later became the SANTA MARGERITA and operated under commercial managers as a Mercantile Fleet Auxiliary tanker.

on the Isherwood or longitudinal system. Sometimes seen as sisterships to OLYMPIA they were larger and indeed their initial design was for a steamship. OLAF to be built in Chatham with Sulzer engines; OLIVIA to be built in Portsmouth with Belgian-designed Carels engines and OLNA¹¹ to be built in Pembroke with German designed MAN engines. Interestingly some records show that *'the ship will be inspected throughout by Admiralty overseers and will not be surveyed for classification in any Registry'*. Owing to wartime building priorities these tankers were cancelled.

In 1914, the Royal Navy was larger and more powerful than it had ever been. The inchoate Royal Fleet Auxiliary could claim only seven vessels with a further three completing and four building [see Annex One].

In 1914 the Navy List records that the Director of Stores Sir John Forsey Kt CVO had on staff a shore-based professional appointment known as his **Technical Assistant** (Richard Murray Esq MVO) – to advise on all technical matters (eg, hull and engines), supervision of all repair work, defect lists, visits to ships during docking, advise as to appointments in RFAs, technical questions relating to the Fleet Coaling Service with four tankers, one collier, a number of yard craft, ten oil fuel depots with a capacity of 446,000 tons [see Annex Two].

¹¹ One source spells this as OLONA.



The motor tanker SANTA MARGHERITA, originally laid down as the Admiralty's 8,000 ton OLYMPIA. Admiralty owned she did not serve directly as RFA but under commercial management as a mercantile fleet auxiliary under Admiralty orders. Unusual for a merchant vessel she has two bow anchors to starboard a leftover from her Admiralty design. (author's collection)

Management and administration ranged between a number of Admiralty departments, such as, Admiralty Transport Department, Naval Stores Department and Department of Naval Contracts. The Director of Stores required them, so he tasked them; but the Director of Transports acquired them, maintained them and crewed them with Mercantile Marine seafarers. The tankers would fall into two significant categories – 'Fleet Attendants' – bunkering vessels and 'Oiler Transports' or 'Overseas Tankers' – freighters.

Commercial management – during World War One a number of tankers in Admiralty employment were handed

over to commercial management. The objective was to avoid complications at neutral loading ports. Ship names were changed on handing over to the managers in order that they lost their Admiralty identity and they operated as mercantile fleet auxiliaries under the **Red Ensign**. [see Annex Four].

It was during this World War One that the term **Royal Fleet Auxiliary Service** first began to appear in official documents and its diverse activities evolve. For example, in April 1916 **Form T299**, with a clause on Naval Discipline, was distributed around the UK as the '**Admiralty Agreement and Account of Crew – Royal Fleet Auxiliary Service**'. This was, eg, the RFA version of the T124Z and T124X agreements [see Annex Seven].

With members of today's RFA being 'sponsored reserves' it is interesting to note the purpose of the T124/T299 agreements. Pre-war a substantial number of the crews on RFAs were Royal Naval Reserve or Royal Fleet Reserve and it was approved that on mobilisation they would remain on their 'six month agreement' with their ship. The T124/T299 was to change the 6-months element and turn it into 'articles for the duration of the war'. For merchant seafarers this introduced a significant culture change with continued employment, while introducing some aspects of the Naval Discipline Act (Section 90) and giving the Admiralty the ability to transfer officers and ratings to other ships as required. The introduction of the T124 (and its variants) also meant that the Admiralty, via a central depot, had on tap a pool of trained seafarers – in effect a Mercantile Marine Reserve. It also introduced 'temporary RNR commissions'



for officers. This being dependant upon an individual's Board of Trade qualifications, eg, Master Foreign Going – Lieutenant RNR, Chief Engineer – Engineer Lieutenant RNR.

Gradually during World War One we start to see changes in the terminology in official documents. Files that were stamped as 'NS Coal' start to become 'NS Fuel'. Reflecting the evolving times we gradually see the Fleet Coaling Service evolve to become the **Fleet Fuelling Service** and Fleet Coaling Officers become **Fleet Fuelling Officers**. These terms remain relevant to Royal Fleet Auxiliaries and appear up to the late 1960s when use begins to evaporate from official documents.

An analysis of official figures issued a century ago reveal that of 76 ships styled as RFAs 53 were tankers on fleet attendant duties in ports and harbours under the guidance of fuelling officers or on freighting work under the Director of Transport. The remaining RFAs were undertaking a miscellaneous range of tasks just like the RFA today [see Annex Five].

Annex One: Fleet list and disposition of Royal Fleet Auxiliaries – June 1914

<i>RFA</i>	<i>Function</i>	<i>Disposition</i>
BURMA	tanker	Sheerness
INDUSTRY	store carrier	Portsmouth
ISLA	petrol carrier *	–
KHARKI	tanker	Portland
MAINE	hospital ship †	under conversion at Pembroke Dock
MERCEDES	collier	Portsmouth
PETROLEUM	tanker	Portland
ATTENDANT	tanker	completing at Chatham
CAROL	tanker	completing at Devonport
TREFOIL	tanker	completing at Pembroke
FEROL	tanker	building at Devonport
OLYMPIA	tanker	building at Vickers, Barrow-in-Furness
SERVITOR	tanker	building at Chatham
TURMOIL	tanker	building at Pembroke

* Petrol carrier for submarines.

† 20 June 1914, in a moment of unparalleled bad timing, the hospital ship RFA MAINE was declared a marine loss following grounding on east coast of Isle of Mull. MEDIATOR then at Pembroke Dock under conversion to a hospital ship was later renamed MAINE.



Annex Two: Statistics on Fleet Coaling Service in 1914

Coal stocks	677,464 tons (estimated)
Oil fuel stocks	465,000 tons (estimated)
<i>Consumption of fuels:</i>	
Coal for fleet purposes	1,840,928 tons (estimated)
Coal for dockyards, etc	224,600 tons (estimated)
Oil fuel	162,000 tons (estimated)
<i>Fleet Coaling establishment (world wide):</i>	
Number of oil fuel installations	9
Number of coal depots where Admiralty stocks kept	37
Number of Admiralty-owned sea-going colliers	1*
Number of oil tankers	4
Number of fleet fuelling 'C' craft †	
For Coal	294
For Oil	22
Tugs and pinnaces	18
Number of personnel employed in RFAs, oilers and Colliers	152
Number of Naval Stores staff employed at Admiralty on Fleet Coaling duties	9

* This is RFA MERCEDES.

† Coal – mostly dumb lighters. Oil – it appears that more of the oil fuel craft tended to be self-propelled.

Annex Three: Director of Transports approved list of Royal Fleet Auxiliaries – May 1916

<i>RFA</i>	<i>Function</i>
ARO	depot ship (submarine)
ATTENDANT	tanker
BACCHUS	water carrier/store ship
BURMA	tanker
CAROL	tanker
FEROL	tanker
HUNGERFORD	water carrier/store ship
INDUSTRY	stores carrier (coastal)
ISLA	tanker (petrol)
KHARKI	tanker
MELITA	salvage vessel
MERCEDES	collier
PETROLUEM	tanker
POLAVON	distilling ship/water tanker
POLSHANNON	stores carrier/water tanker
RELIANCE	repair ship
SERVITOR	tanker
SOBO	depot ship (submarine)
SOKOTO	depot ship (submarine)
THRUSH	salvage vessel
WATERWICH	small despatch vessel
WAVE	small despatch vessel



Annex Four: List of Admiralty owned 'Overseas tankers' funded from Fleet Coaling Vote

8,000-ton purpose-built for the Admiralty:

<i>MFA</i>	<i>Original 'RFA' name</i>	<i>Date</i>
SANTA MARGHERITA	OLYMPIA	1916

Cargo vessels purchased for Special Service Squadron subsequently converted into tankers:

<i>MFA</i>	<i>Original 'RFA' name</i>	<i>Date</i>
ASPENLEAF	SAXOL	1917
BAYLEAF	BAYOL	1917
MAPLELEAF	RANGOL	1916
VINELEAF	TARAKOL	1916
OAKLEAF *	ABADOL	1917

Vessels purchased from trade when building and completed as tankers:

<i>MFA</i>	<i>Original 'RFA' name</i>	<i>Date</i>
BEECHLEAF	OLMOL	1917
BIRCHLEAF	OLDBURY	1916
BRIARLEAF	OLLETTA	1916
BOXLEAF	OLINDA	1917
DOCKLEAF	OLEARY	1917
ELMLEAF	OLIVET	1917
FERNLEAF	OLEANDER	1917
HOLLYLEAF	OLEASTER	1917
LAURELLEAF	OLALLA	1917
LIMELEAF	OLIGARCH	1917
ROSELEAF	CALIFOL	1917
ASHLEAF *	OLGA	1916
PALMLEAF *	OLIPHANT	1916

9,000-ton British class purpose-built as 'overseas tankers' and retained by the Admiralty:

<i>Original MFA / RFA</i>	<i>Later renamed</i>	<i>Date</i>
BRITISH BEACON	OLCADES	1918 / 1937
BRITISH LANTERN	OLIGARCH	1918 / 1937
BRITISH LIGHT	OLWEN	1917 / 1937
BRITISH STAR	OLYNTHUS	1918 / 1937

5,000-ton Fast Leaf class purpose-built fleet attendant tanker for the Admiralty, however, they were initially run as 'overseas tankers' – post-war reverted to fleet duties:

<i>MFA and later RFA</i>	<i>Original 'RFA' name</i>	<i>Date</i>
APPLELEAF	TEXOL	1917
BRAMBLELEAF	RUMOL	1917
CHERRYLEAF	PERSOL	1917
ORANGELEAF	BORNOL	1917
PEARLEAF	GYPOL	1917
PLUMLEAF	TRINOL	1917

In 1917 two additional tankers were purchased out of the Fleet Coaling Funds 8/2/K – DELPHINULA (ex BAYO MARU) and NUCULA (ex SOYA MARU).

* War losses



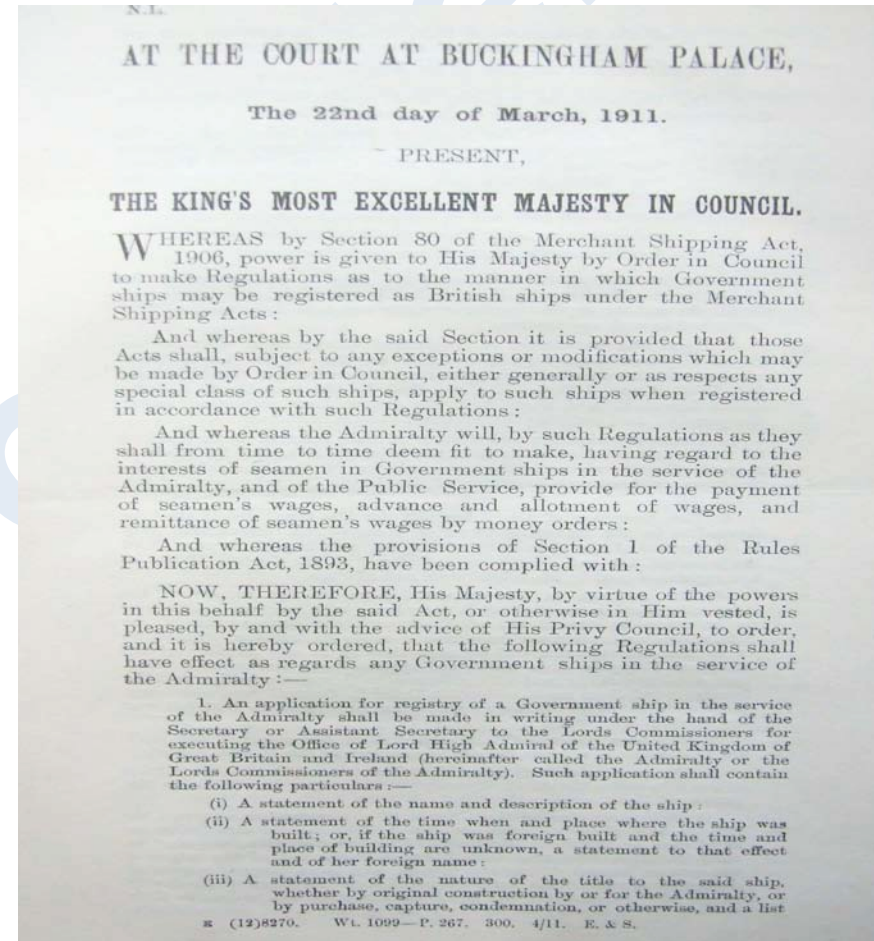
Annex Five: Naval Staff, Signal Division list of Royal Fleet Auxiliaries – July 1918

<i>RFA</i>	<i>Function</i>		
ANCHORITE	depot ship (submarine)	FRANCOL	tanker (2,000 tonner)
ATTENDANT	tanker (1,000 tonner)	GREENOL	tanker
BACCHUS	store ship/water carrier	HICKOROL	tanker (1,000 tonner)
BARKOL	tanker	HOLDFAST	mooring/salvage vessel
BATTERSOL	tanker	INDUSTRY	store carrier (coastal)
BELGOL	tanker (2,000 tonner)	INISSHANNON	water carrier
BIRCHOL	tanker (1,000 tonner)	ISLA	tanker (petrol)
BLACKOL	tanker	KHARKI	tanker
BLACKSTONE	tanker	KIMMEROL	tanker (1,000 tonner)
BLACK DRAGON	fuel hulk	KURUMBA	tanker
BOXOL	tanker (1,000 tonner)	LARCHOL	tanker (1,000 tonner)
BUFFALO	salvage vessel	LIMOL	tanker (1,000 tonner)
BULLFROG	salvage vessel	LIMET	mooring vessel
BURMA	tanker (2,000 tonner)	MELITA	salvage vessel
CAROL	tanker (1,000 tonner)	MERCEDES	collier
CELEROL	tanker (2,000 tonner)	MESSENGER	mooring vessel
CITY OF OXFORD	depot ship/kite balloon ship	MIXOL	tanker (2,000 tonner)
CREOSOL	tanker (1,000 tonner)	MOLLUSC	mooring vessel
DAPPER	salvage ship	MONTENOL	tanker (2,000 tonner)
DISTOL	tanker (1,000 tonner)	OAKOL	tanker (1,000 tonner)
DREDGOL	tanker	PALMOL	tanker (1,000 tonner)
ELDEROL	tanker (1,000 tonner)	PERTHSHIRE	store ship
EBONOL	tanker (1,000 tonner)	PETRELLA	spirit tanker (500 tonner)
ELMOL	tanker (1,000 tonner)	PETROBUS	spirit tanker (500 tonner)
FEROL	tanker (1,000 tonner)	PETROLEUM	tanker
FIDGET	salvage ship	PETRONEL	spirit tanker (500 tonner)
FORTOL	tanker (2,000 tonner)	PHILOL	tanker (1,000 tonner)
		PRESTOL	tanker (2,000 tonner)
		PURFOL	tanker
		RACER	salvage vessel
		RAPIDOL	tanker (2,000 tonner)



RED DRAGON	fuel hulk
RELIANCE	repair ship
RUTHENIA	tanker/fuel hull
SCOTOL	tanker (1,000 tonner)
SERBOL	tanker (2,000 tonner)
SERVITOR	tanker (1,000 tonner)
SILVEROL	tanker
SLAVOL	tanker (2,000 tonner)
SLINGER	??
SPRUCOL	tanker (1,000 tonner)
STEADFAST	mooring vessel
STEADY	salvage vessel
TEAKOL	tanker (1,000 tonner)
THERMOL	tanker (2,000 tonner)
THRUSH	salvage vessel
TREFOIL	tanker (2,000 tonner)
TURMOIL	tanker (2,000 tonner)
VISCOL	tanker (1,000 tonner)
VITOL	tanker (2,000 tonner)
VOLUNTEER	mooring vessel
WATERWITCH	small despatch vessel
WAVE	small despatch vessel

Annex Six: Order-in-Council of 22 March 1911 (extract)



Order-in-Council – 2 March 1911 (opening page).
Source TNA Kew MT9/1281



Annex Seven: Form T299 – Agreement and Account of Crew (extract)

T. -299.

This agreement is to be made out in triplicate. One copy is to be kept on board, one by the Superintendent of Mercantile Marine and the third forwarded as soon as possible to the Director of Transports, Admiralty, London, S.W.

Particulars of Discharge, &c., of any Members of the Crew, and for the engagement of Substitutes, should be reported as soon as possible.

AGREEMENT AND ACCOUNT OF CREW.

ROYAL FLEET AUXILIARY SERVICE.

NAME OF SHIP	Official No.	Port of Registry	Port No. and date of Register	Registered Tonnage		Nominal Horse Power
				Gross	Net	
		LONDON.				

Registered Managing Owner

Name	Address
The Secretary of the Admiralty.	Whitehall, London, S.W.

This Agreement is current for the duration of the War, unless terminated by the Admiralty.

This vessel being a Vessel in His Majesty's Service, under the command of an Officer in His Majesty's Naval Service in time of war, and the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty having directed that with respect to the said vessel the provisions of Section 90 of the Naval Discipline Act, which is set out in the footnote hereto, shall take effect, all persons whose names are subscribed hereto, or who are otherwise borne on the books of the said vessel are in consequence subject to Naval Discipline as provided in the said Section.

The several persons whose names are hereto subscribed, being British subjects, and whose descriptions are set forth against their signatures, hereby agree with _____ for and on behalf of the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty to serve on board this vessel, or any other vessel in the Royal Fleet Auxiliary Service, under the command of an Officer in His Majesty's Service as the Admiralty may from time to time direct in the several capacities expressed against their respective names for the duration of the war, but if the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty should so desire, they or the Commanding Officer of the Ship may terminate this Agreement at a port in the United Kingdom at any time on giving twenty-four hours' notice.

It is further agreed by the said _____ that in the event of death or injury received on duty in hostilities in which Great Britain is engaged, Pensions or Allowances will be granted in accordance with the Scheme printed on the last page hereof.

And it is further agreed that the additional clauses which are printed on the last page hereof and numbered _____ are adopted by the parties hereto, and shall be considered as embodied in this Agreement.

In witness whereof the said parties have subscribed their names on the other side hereof on the day specified against their respective signatures.

Commanding Officer of the Ship.

This _____ day of _____ 191 _____.

FOOTNOTE:—

NAVAL DISCIPLINE ACT—Section 90:

With respect to vessels in His Majesty's Service in time of war, whether belonging to His Majesty or not, which are not wholly owned by Naval Ratings, but being either armed or under the command of an officer in His Majesty's Naval Service, the following provisions shall take effect in any case the Admiralty think fit so to direct and when such direction is given the same shall be specified in the ship's Articles.

- Every person borne on the books of any such vessel shall be subject to this Act.
- Any offence committed by any such person shall be tried and punished as the like offence might be tried and punished if committed by any person in or belonging to His Majesty's Navy, and borne on the books of any of His Majesty's Ships in commission.
- Every such officer who is to be tried by Court-martial shall be placed under all necessary restraint until he can be tried by Court-martial.
- On Application made to the Lords of the Admiralty, or to the Commander-in-Chief, or Senior Officer of any of His Majesty's Ships or Vessels of War whereof mentioned in this Act, or to the Admiralty, Vice-master-in-Chief, or Senior Officer (as the case may be) shall assemble and hold a Court-martial for the trial of the offender.
- The Officer commanding every such vessel shall have the same power in respect of all other persons borne on the books thereof, or for the time being on board the vessel, as the Officer commanding one of His Majesty's Ships has for the time being in respect of the Officers and Crew thereof or other persons on board the same. Provided that such power shall have such power as aforesaid.
- The Naval Commander-in-Chief and Senior Naval Officer in His Majesty's Service shall have the same power over the Officers and Crew of every such vessel as they have for the time being over the Officers and Crew of any of His Majesty's Ships.

T. 54205/1915.
[2084] 41637 1060 12/10/15 342 U & B 111

'Royal Fleet Auxiliary Service' Agreement and Account of Crew – Form T299 – extract. Source TNA Kew MT23/593

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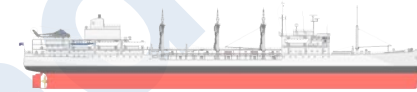
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