

HOUSE OF LORDS

Wednesday, 23rd July, 1958

NEW TITLE OF NAVAL SIGNALMEN

LORD CONESFORD: My Lords, I beg to ask the Question which stands in my name on the Order Paper.

[The Question was as follows:

To ask Her Majesty's Government whether a leading signalman in the Navy is in future to be called a leading tactical communication operator; and, if so, why.]

(Ed. We still think he will be known as a killick bunting).

THE FIRST LORD OF THE ADMIRALTY (THE EARL OF SELKIRK): My Lords, the noble Lord is correct in his assumption. The purpose of the new title is to indicate more precisely the nature of the duties these ratings nowadays carry out. The Branch concerned considers the new names an improvement, and can be compared with the change of the name from stoker to engineering mechanic. It brings them more into line with the terms used in civilian employment. The title of this rating is admittedly rather cumbersome when spoken in full, but it will normally be abbreviated in the letters "L.T.O."

LORD CONESFORD: My Lords, does that mean that in future a naval officer will never make a signal but will operate a tactical communication? Is the First Lord aware that for centuries our sailors have been masters of terse and vigorous English? Will the Admiralty honour this tradition instead of wallowing in gutless verbosity?

THE EARL OF SELKIRK: My Lords, I think the noble Lord may rest assured that the Royal Navy will continue to make signals of all characters. I think the noble Lord may also be assured that the Royal Navy will continue to express itself in terse English, whether in terms of endearment or otherwise.

THE EARL OF DUNDEE: My Lords, will an admiral now be called a leading personnel operator?

THE EARL OF SELKIRK: I think the noble Earl will prove incorrect.

EARL ATLEE: Have the sailors expressed themselves in terse English on this change?

THE EARL OF CORK AND ORRERY: My Lords, is not this a case of change for the sake of change—a policy from which, I am told by some of my noble friends, the Navy is suffering lately?

THE EARL OF SELKIRK: That is not so. I can give the noble Earl one other reason which I think is important. We have, of course, to consider the

later civilian employment of sailors, and these words do make the position clearer. It is sometimes thought that a signalman is simply somebody who waves flags. The point is, that these words indicate that he is a highly specialised man of a much wider training and specialisation than that. I think that that is a point which must be borne in mind, even though, as I frankly admit, these particular words are indeed cumbersome.

EARL HOWE: My Lords, may I ask the noble Earl whether this definition of a signalman will be circulated to the Labour Exchanges; and, if so, will they understand it?

THE EARL OF SELKIRK: The Labour Exchanges will no doubt learn about it. What is important is that when people are being engaged for civil employment there is some idea of the very technical and complicated work which these men have learned during their period in the Service. This title gives a fuller picture than the term formerly used.

LORD CONESFORD: Why on earth should the word "signalman" mean a man who waves flags?

THE EARL OF SELKIRK: That I cannot answer but I believe it is generally understood to be the case—certainly it was the original function for which he was employed.

LORD REA: My Lords, when communications are made which are not tactical, who will be employed to make them?

THE EARL OF SELKIRK: Those communications which are not tactical will be made by a radio communication operator.

LORD CONESFORD: My Lords, if this change has not yet come into force, will the Admiralty reconsider it in order to meet the wishes of both Houses of Parliament? Finally, is my noble friend aware that this is not only not good English; it is not even tolerable Scots?

THE EARL OF SELKIRK: My Lords, I will certainly bear the noble Lord's point in mind, and in future, I will endeavour, in matters of this character, to take advantage of Lord Conesford's special knowledge of English.

LORD BALFOUR OF INCHRYE: My Lords, if the First Lord is going to reconsider the matter, would he give an opportunity for another Question to be put to him before the matter is finally decided?

THE EARL OF SELKIRK: It is open to the noble Lord to put to me any question he likes.

LORD BALFOUR OF INCHRYE: Would the First Lord undertake that the decision shall not be reached and then the House told afterwards, but that the House shall have an opportunity of asking if the Minister is ready to come to a decision?

THE EARL OF SELKIRK: My Lords, I am afraid I cannot do that. This decision has been reached and it has in fact been promulgated; that is the reason why the information is published. But I will certainly consider what has been said to-day.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Wednesday, 16th July, 1958

ORAL ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

ROYAL NAVY Signalmen (Title)

10. **Mr. Lipton** asked the Parliamentary Secretary to the Admiralty why signalmen in the Royal Navy are now officially described as tactical communication operators.

Mr. R. Allan: The title of signalman no longer adequately describes the present day functions of the rating concerned. The new title reflects his main duties, which are in that field of communications connected with the tactical handling of a fleet. The demand for this change originated amongst the officers and men of the communications branch.

Mr. Lipton: Is this really the time to introduce new-fangled long-winded titles like the one I mention in my Question, plus radio communication operators, chief radio communication supervisors, and so on, which are to be found in the incredible Admiralty Fleet Order 1690 issued on 11th July? Although the hon. Gentleman said that the officers are in favour of it, is he aware that the lower deck has already found a one syllable word to describe this ponderous polysyllabic language? Why not cut out all this nonsense and all the difficulties that will be involved in new documentation, amended publications, and so on?

Mr. Allan: I did say in my Answer that both officers and men in the communications branch

wanted this change. I very much doubt whether the title given by the lower deck is any more original than some of the titles here. But the point simply is that in the communications branch there is a great deal of common training; and nowadays masts are cluttered with aerials, and so on. The old duties of the signalmen, the flag hoists, are not being performed by him, and ships nowadays are stationed further apart so that semaphore is not much used. All this means that signallers today are much more concerned with R.T. than other forms of communication.

Mr. Iremonger: Is my hon. Friend aware that this will appear to many of us as part of a continuing and deep-laid plot to "drearyise" the Royal Navy? Could he possibly explain what, if any, positive advantage will accrue from this new nomenclature?

Mr. Allan: I think that the Navy is as gay as it has ever been, if not more so. However, my hon. Friend probably remembers the title of a petty officer, namely, P.O.O.W., Petty Officer of the Watch, a rather cumbersome title. In civilian communication centres his opposite number is called a supervisor. My hon. Friend will remember that the P.O.O.W. is a supervisor and not an operator, and therefore the new term more accurately describes his function. Also, another point which is particularly stressed by the ratings concerned is that if one applies for a civilian job and gives the new name for his previous occupation his qualifications can be immediately understood.