

# Pirates Visit Mombasa

by Shirley Pool

**1950s** I can still remember the sweet anticipation. As Christmas neared, one of the Royal Navy ships would visit Mombasa harbour. And we children from the Mombasa Primary School were invited to visit the ship. The day finally arrived. The boys had their hair slicked back and we girls looked smart in our white uniform dresses. We piled



*The HMS Ark Royal that visited Mombasa was the fourth ship in the Royal Navy to carry that name.*

onto the bus, which drove us from school down to the harbour. As we neared the harbour, the driver went slower and slower. We shouted and encouraged him to hurry along, but to no avail.

Just inside the harbour gates were large piles of sisal and tea, all waiting to be loaded onto various ships. As we passed these stacks of cargo, out jumped a vicious group of pirates. They wore torn-off trousers and eye patches and carried cutlasses. They boarded our bus and trussed us up and carried us off – all to our shouts of excitement and glee.

They hoisted us onto their ship and bundled us down a tunnel made of canvas. We tumbled out the bottom end on top of a pile of mattresses to face the captain of the ship dressed up as the chief pirate with his bosun by his side. They stamped our hands with a skull and crossbones and made us vow not to wash it off for a week. Then they rushed us to another part of the ship for a big party with tables full of treats and big bowls of ice cream.

It was part of the Mombasa tradition and we school kids loved the yearly pirates party. One of the last years I was at Mombasa Primary, the ship that docked at the harbour was *HMS Ark Royal*. And the party was as good as ever.

Many years later I lived on the Seychelles where my husband and I had a dairy farm. It was June 1976 and France Albert Rene had just staged a coup and declared the Seychelles to be an independent nation. At the independence celebrations, the *Ark Royal* was in port. The British naval attaché called me and asked if I would host the captain for a meal of my famous baked fish. At first I refused. Why not take him to the Reef Hotel? Besides, I already had four sailors at the house, older men who didn't mind staying in a house full of kids and dogs. But the attaché insisted and I finally agreed.

The sailors weren't all that happy to have their commanding officer coming for a meal. After all, they were on shore leave having fun playing cricket on the beach with my children. But the captain did come and told his men to be at ease. After the meal, we sat chatting. I mentioned that I'd been on board the *Ark Royal* in the early 1950s when the ship had hosted the annual pirate party in Mombasa. As I said that, the captain got a far-away look in his eyes. "Are you sure it was the *Ark Royal*?" he asked.

I had a good memory for details and I assured him it was.

With a big smile on his face, the captain said, "Then I was one of the sailors aboard the *Ark Royal* when you came. You've described the party just as it happened."

How amazing to have that common memory with the ship's captain over 20 years after our wonderful pirate party Mombasa.