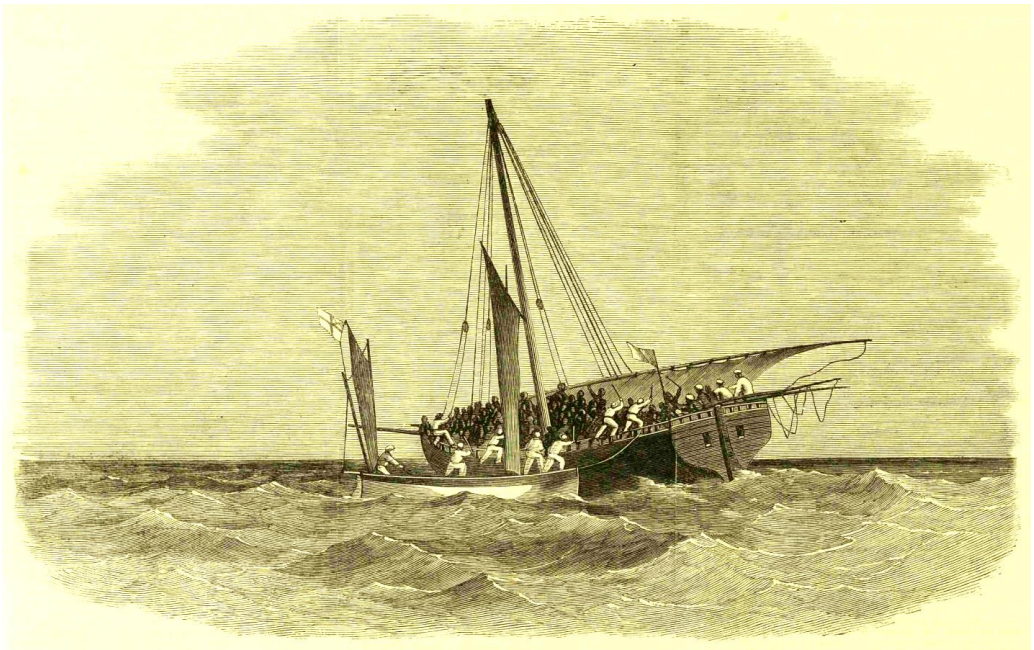


SHARK! – AN EAST AFRICAN SAILOR'S ALBERT MEDAL 1st CLASS

by Glenn M. Stein, FRGS, FRCGS

In March 1988 I acquired a copy of Wilson and McEwen's *Gallantry*, and while leafing through its pages, a mere four sentences relating the extraordinary courage of a man named Farabani stopped me dead in my tracks.

In the 1860s, the Royal Navy was finally gaining an upper hand on the better-known West African slave trade – but a fresh campaign against large scale human trafficking was forming on the other side of the continent. Slaves were being shipped from the island of Zanzibar and other East African ports, to the Middle East, and also other places via the Sahara Desert and Indian Ocean. It took major diplomatic activity – combined with 30 years of constant anti-slave work, especially in ships' boats – to grind this trade to a halt.



Suppression of the Slave Trade on the East Coast of Africa: The Cutter of HMS *Daphne* Capturing a Slave Dhow off Brora (*The Illustrated London News*, 27 February 1869). Dhows are traditional sailing vessels in the Red Sea and Indian Ocean region, and are still in much use today.

The official opening of the Suez Canal in November 1869 brought about a change in the employment of 'Kroomen' (locally recruited West African sailors) by the Royal Navy, who up until this time, had been used in ships operating all along the East and West African coasts, as well as in East Indian and Chinese waters. Captains of Her Majesty's ships sailing to and from the Indian Ocean, China, and the East Indies Station, were now ordered to avoid the West African coast. Consequently, Kroomen were no longer allowed employment in vessels on the East Indies Station, and Seedies were to be gradually substituted in their places.



'Cupid', an officer's servant onboard HMS *Dryad* (NMM)

This boy, nicknamed Cupid, was originally of the Nyoro tribe. He was captured by a rival tribe in present-day Uganda, sold into slavery, and given the Muslim name Mabruk. The dhow transporting him was intercepted by HMS *Daphne* in 1868, and he was employed by the Royal Navy. Mabruk became an officer's servant onboard HMS *Dryad*, and was in Mauritius when this photograph was taken around 1870.

Naval historian Kenneth Douglas-Morris explained the origin of the title:

The title of "Seedie" in recent times probably derives from the word for "Lord", which in Hindi is "Sidi" and in Arabic "Saiyid". In the 17th century the word "Syddies" referred to "frizled woolly-pated Blacks"! By the middle of the nineteenth century "Seedie" became a popular generic word for African negroes, from the Arabian Coast, working in the ports and on shipping on the West Coast of India.

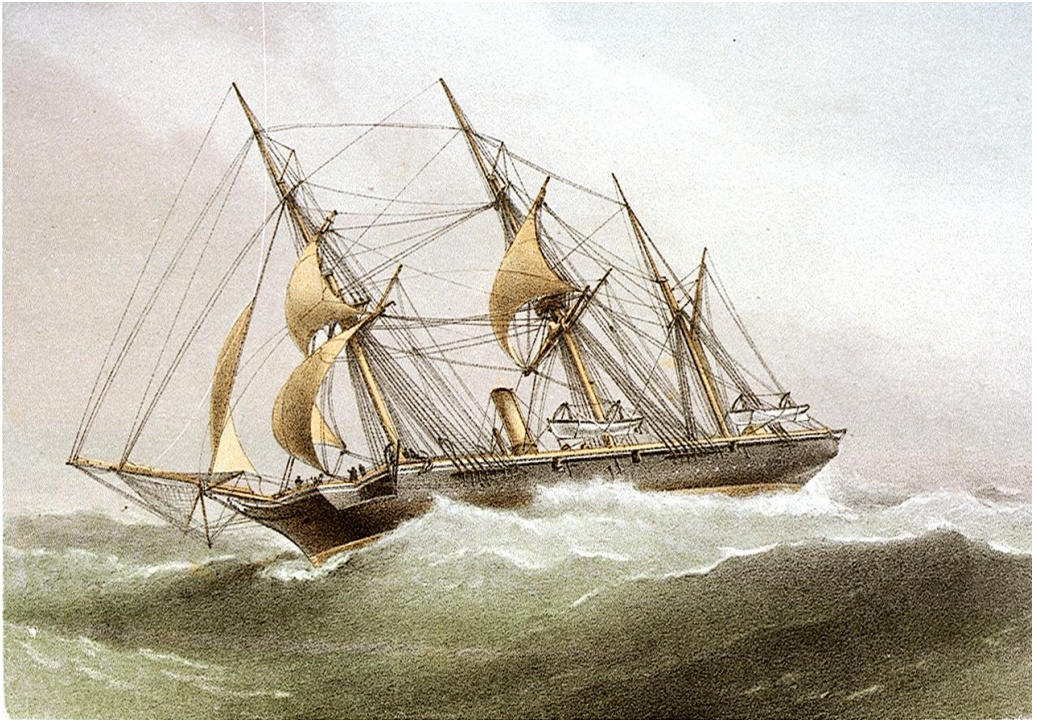
HMS *Wild Swan*, a 170-foot long composite sloop, built chiefly of iron and teak and launched in 1876, sailed on her first commission the following year for the East Indies Station, with orders to conduct anti-slavery patrols off East Africa. Farabani was the Seedie Tindal (supervisor of Seedies) in *Wild Swan*; such a person was usually an older man, ranked as a petty officer, who was responsible for the Seedies' work, discipline, and anything dealing with them onboard.

In the 1890s, while the writer L.S. Lewis was researching in government offices for an article about that coveted lifesaving decoration – the Albert Medal – Farabani's designation of 'Seedie Tindal' caught his eye. Lewis was initially:

somewhat puzzled to read that the Queen had been graciously pleased to confer the Albert Medal of the First Class on Farabani, Seedie Tindal, serving in H.M. ship, the *Wild Swan*

and the unusual nautical title wrinkled his brow.

I have since learnt that "Seedie" is the generic name given to certain East African native "boys," while "Tindal" was the name given to the boatswain's mate [petty officer].



HMS *Wild Swan* (Society for Nautical Research)

Lewis' pen will now take over, as the frighteningly dangerous waters along East Africa's coast flow from his quill:

The *Wild Swan* chanced to be off the coast of Mozambique in the year 1880, charged with the over hauling of slave dhows. On the 8th of August the vessel numbered among her crew a fugitive slave boy, named Farejallah; and at 11.45 on that day several of the Seedies were going on shore to wash their clothes, when a flannel garment belonging to Farejallah fell into the water. The boy was ordered to go into the punt to pick up the flannel, but instead of doing this he went on to a landing-stage alongside and then dived into the sea. The lieutenant in charge was immediately afterwards heard calling loudly for a rifle; and it was then seen that a monstrous shark had just glided under the black boy in the water and seized him by the leg, dragging him down, struggling, for about six feet. It is here necessary to explain that the smallest detail of this awful affair was perfectly visible from the deck of the warship, so beautifully smooth and clear was the sea. When Farejallah

rose to the surface it was seen that his leg had been bitten off at the knee, and the water around was tinged with blood. The monster again turned on its side, and coming up once more under the unfortunate slave, dragged him down another ten feet, tearing off his remaining leg and part of the thigh. On Farejallah rising to the surface this time, closely followed by the shark, the Seedie Tindal, Farabani, jumped from the netting into the water and brought the unfortunate boy to the surface, swimming with him until the punt was reached.

[Commander Seymour H.P. Dacres] of the *Wild Swan* states in his report that what makes this a peculiarly gallant deed is the fact that Farabani saw the whole of the horrid catastrophe from the first seizure of the boy; and, furthermore, that when he jumped into the water, not only the attacking shark, but three other monstrous and fearful brutes were seen close to the ship, attracted, no doubt, by the blood.

One authority, who knows the spot very well, says that Farabani's escape was little short of a miracle. The same distinguished officer adds that the sharks at this place have been known to capsize the native canoes; and he never knew anything thrown into the water that had not been immediately torn to pieces by enormous ground sharks.

The senior officer in charge of the station, Admiral [William Gore] Jones, recommended the granting of a pecuniary reward in this case, in addition to the medal, sagaciously pointing out that the latter would not be so thoroughly appreciated by the recipient or understood by the other Seedies.



Albert Medal of the First Class,
BOT specimen (DNW auctions,
London, 2017)

The account of the presentation of the medal is dated from Zanzibar, January 21, 1881. The officer intrusted with the duty [Captain Brownrigg, HMS *London*] issued a general memo to the ships assembled at Zanzibar; and he proceeded on the morning of the 20th of January on board the *Wild Swan*. He then assembled the Seedies of that ship, together with those of the *London* and *Ruby*, and as many officers and men as could be spared. The medal was then publicly presented to Farabani [and pinned on him by the Captain's wife, Mrs. Brownrigg], together with the additional grant of £20. The Royal Warrant was read and explained to him; and he requested that his grateful thanks might be conveyed to Her Majesty for the high honour conferred on him, and to the Board of Trade for their handsome present of £20. At the conclusion of the proceedings three cheers were given for Farabani, who signed his mark to the usual receipt form. Unfortunately, the slave boy, Farejallah, died at three o'clock p.m. on the 8th of August, 1880, in the Military Hospital, Mozambique, where he had been removed; he only lingered a few hours after the dreadful occurrence.

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