

HMS Exmouth: The Past and the Present Reunited

During a Special Meeting in 2001 with Former Crew Member the late James Gordon French

Following the broadcast of a brief TV newsclip on remembrance Sunday, featuring HMS Exmouth, a remarkable discovery was made. Sitting at home, watching his television that day was ex-Leading Seaman L.T.O. James Gordon French – affectionately known as ‘Froggy’ by everybody on board the Exmouth throughout the 3 ½ years he served aboard her.



James Gordon French
aka “Froggy”

His is an exceptional story, as two weeks prior to Exmouth’s loss with all hands, Gordon can still recall being put ashore “somewhere in Scotland” to return to Portsmouth for his PO’s course and waving goodbye to his mates on board as the ship cast off. There was the affectionate exchange of banter that can only be brought about by sharing both the trials and tribulations of life onboard a warship – “See you in Pompey, Froggy!” Words that even today, 61 years later, reduce this incredible man to tears as he believes that he was cheated of the fate that befell his shipmates.

This was not to be the only emotionally charged moment of time spent in the company of one of life’s survivors and a living link to the men we all remember with such affection.

So it was on Saturday 24th November that Sue Eastwood and I made the journey to Froggy’s home in the New Forest in Hampshire. It was with some trepidation, mixed with an air of expectation, that we rang the bell at the drive to his home that sunny autumn morning.

Froggy appeared, resplendent in the Exmouth Association fleece that Mark Reeves had sent him. First impressions were of a man whose appearance belied his 85 years and his cheery greeting instantly impressed upon us that here was a man who would stand out in any crowd. The kind of character who would have been able to help lift the spirits up even in the most dire of circumstances – a representative of that generation who ‘for our tomorrow, gave their today.’

Once past the faithful German Shepherd, who was kept locked well out of the way for the duration of our visit, we were introduced to Froggy’s wife, Rita. A very genuine welcome was extended to both Sue and I and it was soon apparent that Froggy not only had a loving wife but also a real soul mate in Rita, and we were kept well supplied with tea and biscuits during our visit.

Our first enquiry was as to how long Froggy had spent in the Navy and whilst we never got a definitive answer, we knew that he had joined some years before the war and probably left soon after hostilities ended. However, this question provoked the first reaction from him. Serving aboard the cruiser Belfast on Russian convoy duty (after his time on the Exmouth) they were entering Reykjavik in Iceland after a particularly rough spell of weather and Froggy’s “part of ship” (workplace) had flooded. As the area contained battery acid, there was a fear that the acid could combine with sea water to form hydrogen gas - presenting a real threat of the gas entering the air ducting on board.

Froggy, a senior rate at this time, would not allow any of his lads to enter the danger area. Obtaining breathing set from a Stoker PO, Froggy entered the compartment himself to open the portholes with the intention of letting out water and “airing” the compartment. However, it wasn’t long before he was almost overcome himself and had to be pulled out “half alive”. When he came round, Froggy realised that the PO in question had been negligent in his duty and sent Froggy in with an almost empty set of breathing apparatus. This slackness on his shipmate’s part prompted a perhaps-understandable reaction, and with one punch he laid the unfortunate Stoker PO out. The consequence of which resulted in Froggy being “busted” – reduced in rank. This incident, brought about by slackness, was in complete contrast to Froggy’s memory of the Exmouth – in his words “a most efficient and happy ship.”

Froggy’s first memories of the Exmouth related to the ship travelling up from the Western Approaches with a convoy, then making its way up the west coast stopping at Milford Haven and Glasgow on the Clyde, where Froggy believes he left her after his 3 ½ years on board. It then took him another couple of days, due to the restrictions of wartime travel, to journey by train back to Portsmouth. Froggy recalls how the ship’s company were looking forward to ‘Boiler Cleaning Leave’ – a routine which involved the ship being alongside for 8 days, enabling each half of the crew to take 4 days leave at a time.

At this moment, Froggy’s memory failed him and he was most frustrated that he couldn’t recall the exact date and location. He also could not find his Service Records to confirm the detail. We reassured him that this minor detail did not matter, and we both felt that we may have been asking too much to expect even Froggy to recall every detail after an absence of over 60 years.

Our next approach was to show Froggy a photo of the Exmouth, depicting both her Port and Starboard sides. This was the key to set Froggy off again. It was evident that he knew every square inch of our ship – 3 ½ years aboard the Exmouth had left its impression.

“If I remember”, he said, “we had the pennant number HO2 painted in white on her sides.” Froggy remembered this as it reminded him of the chemical formula for water (H₂O). He then tried to recall the location of the ship’s nameplate – “Just here,” pointing to the photo, “as you came up the gang way when the ship was tied up alongside, you would see it.”

“Our messdeck was just down there under the Focastle”, again pointing to the photo. “As you went along the passage there was a tiny little shop on board known as the NAAFI. It was only open for 5 minutes at a time. It was a regular cry to hear the young NAAFI manager on board shout ‘NAAFI Open!’ to which the crew replied ‘NAAFI Open – Mind your ruddy fingers, NAFFI Closed !!’ ”

It was at this point that Froggy, who had been on his feet since our arrival, had a slight turn – “the room was spinning.” I am pleased to say that once seated and given a few minutes rest, Froggy was soon back in full flow.

As a Torpedo rating, he then went on to describe the location of the torpedo tubes on board and a conversation he had had with Mark Reeves of our Dive Team. Froggy had warned Mark of the danger of the priming devices on the nose, which he felt may have inadvertently set themselves as the ship sank.

Froggy also recalled the greasing and Brasso polish routines carried out onboard every day. His job in action was on the quarter-deck, where he would set the depth charges. Froggy described how the depth charge throwers either side of the ship were operated remotely from the bridge, with his job being to drop them over the stern of the ship. “To watch the great big plumes of water set off by the underwater detonation, we believed we couldn’t miss any submarine lurking below.”

Froggy went on to describe how Lieutenant Commander “Happy” Day operated the Asdic echo sounder, showing the position by the Bridge on the photograph. Anyone who has seen

the film 'The Cruel Sea' will have formed their own mental image of Froggy's description of the Asdic's "PING – PING – PING – PONG" on contact. Once found, the ship would go full steam ahead "and believe me that little blighter could move" he said, pointing to the photo of the Exmouth.

Froggy told a story of when the Exmouth was in the Mediterranean off the coast of Barcelona during the Spanish Civil War. Patrolling the coast one night, they saw and heard gunfire from the horizon. He described the shells flying over the top of the mast as sounding like a runaway traction engine. The Captain had the White Ensign hoisted to the top of the mainmast and the ship's searchlight trained on it in order to help identify the Exmouth as a British warship.

The Civil War threw up another story concerning the two Spanish cruisers, the Canarias and the Baleares (named after the two island groups). Froggy was uncertain as to how they were sunk, but whilst the Exmouth was steaming on patrol they came across two empty life rafts from the ships which were causing a navigational hazard "and had to be removed."

Froggy went on to elaborate, giving information as to the friendly rivalry between different elements of the crew and in particular the Exmouth Gunners. "In the Royal Navy the Gunnery Branch is trained at Whale Island near Portsmouth and all you hear there is the great big Gunner's Mate shouting out 'LEFT RIGHT LEFT RIGHT!' " To the Torpedo and Electrical Departments on board, the Gunners were known as the 'Gates and Gaiters' (due to their wearing white anklets and shouting orders on the parade ground). In return the 'educated' electricians were known as the 'Intelligence Department' – another example of the friendly exchanges between the crew. "It was all laughable in those days" said Froggy.

In any event, the Exmouth's 'A' gun (the forward 4.7-inch gun) was detailed to sink the offending life rafts but much to the amusement of the crew, the Gunners could not hit and sink the empty craft. Froggy went below to see 'Cooky' to get a bucketful of spuds and, pointing to the picture, described how he came to the back of the gun turret and offered the spuds to the Gunners to see if they would have better luck throwing them! It was taken in very good humour by all concerned.

Froggy then recalls a visit to the Pool of London on the Thames in 1937 and passing under Tower Bridge. After dropping anchor, Froggy spies the Postman rowing out with all the ship's mail in sacks piled up in his boat. He recalls the Postman shouting out "Is that the Exmouth?" to which Froggy responded, "No mate – it's the bloody Queen Mary!" The flippant remark earned him a reprimand from "Jimmy the One" (First Lieutenant) who happened to be passing within earshot at the time. It transpired that the Postman had the last word, as Froggy comments that the fruity language of his reply meant, "he would never have gone to heaven!"

When quizzed over the King's Inspection of HMS Exmouth in August 1939, Froggy could not recall this visit (though it is actually recorded in the Ship's Log) but he does remember other 'royal' occasions. He recalls the then Princess Elizabeth aged about 12 and her sister Margaret, both dressed in Fawn coats. He recalls a visit to Ireland and remembers the two Princesses coming up from the Wardroom (towards the stern) and watching both of them walking down the gangway talking to each other as they went ashore – Froggy remembers this very well.

He made reference to another very interesting and historic royal occasion which took place whilst tied up alongside in Portsmouth harbour. Froggy was detailed in the party to tie up HMS Ambuscade outboard of the Exmouth. Having carried out what they thought to have been a routine task, the crew were then directed below. The Quartermaster later told them that a large black limousine had pulled up on the jetty and King Edward 8th was taken across the deck of the Exmouth to join HMS Ambuscade, which took him on to France on his abdication.

Froggy recalled the Captain of HMS Exmouth for most of his time serving aboard her as a Captain Llewellyn-Morgan. Referring again to the ship's time in the Pool of London, he can remember that for the week or 10 days they spent in London, the ship was in the newspapers on two occasions. The first of these involved the act of saving a party of people whose boat was in danger of being run down on the Thames. Froggy showed us a certificate awarded to him stating that "on the 9th May 1937" he had "gone to the rescue of eight persons who were in imminent danger of drowning in the River Thames." Whilst he did not claim all the glory, "others helped", he did tell us that playing centre forward in naval water polo teams ("a tough game") had made him a strong swimmer.

Froggy then went on to describe how he had dived in from the side of the wheelhouse, again pointing to the photo of the ship. Froggy treated us to an action replay in the manner of his "swallow dive" from high up on the Exmouth – "I can remember the wind rushing past my face, before entering the water." The man rowing the 8 passengers across the Thames had seen the steamer bearing down and jumped overboard to save his own skin, leaving his passengers to their fate. We were then treated to another explanation of what Froggy would have done had he caught up with him. He described how he helped lift the survivors out of the water, especially one "glamorous young lady" who had lost her shoes. Froggy, putting his hand under her foot to assist in pushing her up, claims that his hand slipped and ran all the way up her leg – only to result in a highly shrieked rebuke. The newspaper reporters kept pestering the ship for a story and the Captain, not wanting the attention, sent the heroes of the rescue home on six day's leave to get them away from the ship – something Froggy was most pleased about.

The second incident involved the Captain who was due to go ashore "dressed up in his Sunday best, with as much gold braid as he could carry." He stood proudly on full show to on-lookers in the stern of the ship's power boat, only to end up red-faced as the boat broke down in midstream, began to drift and had to be rescued by a Police launch. Of course, this incident made the papers too – much to the amusement of Froggy.

When we asked if Froggy would like to look at some of the photos of the crew that we had brought along, his reply was an enthusiastic "Oh yes please!" "One man I am particularly interested in is 'Bonker' Edge" who was also a torpedo rating and was very close to our Froggy. Best of mates, also at times best of enemies – but it would appear that the years had not diminished the respect he had for his shipmate. In fact, Froggy recalled how 'Bonker' had predicted the microchip and fibre-optic cabling – obviously a man with vision.

Sue was most interested to see Froggy's reaction when she showed him a picture of her own grandfather, Able Seaman Walter Andrews, who stood at 6 feet. It was uncanny that at almost the same moment, both Sue and Froggy mentioned his nickname "Lofty". It was one of those moments that made the hair on the back of your neck stand up – this indeed was a living link back to our men on the ship.

This was followed by the only other positive identification Froggy had of the crew we know – Sub Lieutenant Roberts. "He was a lovely man" – words spoken with true affection. Froggy recalled an incident in rough weather at sea when the ship keeled over to such a degree that water lapped over the side and Froggy found himself clinging to a winch whilst submerged in a prostrate position – "I felt like a human torpedo." When he surfaced he saw that a crew mate appeared badly injured and, along with Mr Roberts, manhandled him to safety, whilst the ship was tossed about. Froggy, himself hurt, remembers that it was Mr Roberts' outstretched hand that pulled him across the torpedo tubes to safety – risking his own life to do so.

One other rating Froggy spoke of at some length was a young fellow called Coombes, "a studious youth studying chemistry, and the butt of messdeck humour." However, Froggy took Coombes under his wing, making him the Boson's Mate in the ship's cutter. Froggy told a story of the mischievous pair deliberately soaking one of the officers aboard by hitting a

wave whilst taking him ashore in the ship's boat. He can recall writing to Coombes' parents after the loss of Exmouth.

On the subject of the Rum Ration, Froggy's eyes sparkled as he told us the daily ration allowance: Petty Officers and above – a tot of neat rum, Ratings – 2 parts water, 1 part rum - 'grog'.

We showed Froggy the photographs we had taken at the Memorial Weekend in Wick. Both Sue and I were at a loss for words as he sat sobbing at the site of the headstones in the cemetery at Wick. Shipmates, all gone - but in the heart of this former crew member, not forgotten.

Spirits were lifted soon after when Sue took the initiative and phoned the only other known 'survivor' who had served on the Exmouth, Frank Cormell. To see and hear the two old matelots relating stories of their time aboard was a joy to behold. And whilst they couldn't place each other instantly after the passing of 60 years, they were able to identify one incident when they were both on board – the ship's visit to its namesake, the town of Exmouth in Devon. They both remembered the rough weather that blew up, leaving the liberty men ashore to enjoy another night of unexpected shore leave. Froggy recalled how during his time left on board he managed to scald himself whilst preparing a hot meal and could not be taken off for treatment due to the dreadful weather conditions.

Time had flown by and we had crammed so much into our first meeting with this grand old man. It was time to leave but not before taking some photos of James Gordon French and his lovely wife, along with the pair of us – grandchildren of two of his former shipmates. We will meet again.

Sadly, Gordon passed away in March 2009. In the time that we knew him, he regularly kept in touch by both phone and letter. He attended the memorial service in the Devon town of Exmouth in 2004 where he laid a wreath on behalf of the association. Everyone who witnessed this will never forget the look of grief combined with pride etched on his face that day.

FOOTNOTE

We were able to put him in touch with the brother, Arthur Edge, of one of his former shipmates on the Exmouth, they regularly chatted on the phone together.

At Gordon's funeral, Hazel and Tony Pilkington, represented our association with a floral tribute. Hazels father, PO Albert Rayner, was lost aboard the Exmouth.

