

REFLECTIONS ON THE HMS EXMOUTH MEMORIAL WEEKEND AT WICK ON 1st & 2nd SEPTEMBER, 2001

After much preparation and anticipation, the weekend of the 1st and 2nd September was finally upon us. A diverse group of mixed ages and from a variety of backgrounds, we each made the long journey to furthest reaches of the northern Scotland. We travelled from opposite ends of the UK and the distant shores of the USA and New Zealand.

For most it was a pilgrimage of love and a quest for the truth, born out of 61 years of uncertainty and heartbreak. We were in Wick to put an end to the years of silence and give thanks for the lives of our men – the crew of His Majesty's Ship, Exmouth. Our unity was based on a common bond and the strongest of affiliations - the tragic loss of our loved-ones on Sunday 21st January, 1940, in the cold waters of the North Sea. Early that fateful morning, HMS Exmouth gained the cruel distinction of being the first naval loss of the war with all hands, when she was torpedoed by a German U-boat just 22 miles from the coast of Wick.

Most of those left to mourn her loss, had little idea of the relevance of Wick as a special and important place in relation to the crew's memory. In 1940 there had been talk of a mine and some had speculated as to her loss by torpedo, but the true story of HMS Exmouth's final hours was never revealed. It was to later transpire that the common experience of most families in those dark and early days of war was a total lack of explanation or information from official sources.

Over 60 years later, a search for information on the Internet by the family of Able Seaman Walter Andrews, led to contact being established with The European Technical Dive Centre in Orkney in February 2001. Mark Reeves and his 'Extreme Dive Team', using information provided by respected wreck researchers Bob Baird and Kevin Heath, located and dived the site of the wreck of Exmouth – prior consent for this having been granted by the MoD at the request of the Andrews Family. From the initial moment of contact, the ETDC and the researchers worked with relatives to provide us with all the information we had previously been denied. So modern technology provided what straight-forward and honest talk failed to do all those years ago – a path to the truth.

Now we were finally in possession of the facts and we sought to gain as much media-based publicity as possible in order to contact other relatives. We heard how Exmouth had been escorting a merchant ship, Cyprian Prince, with military supplies for Scapa Flow. After Exmouth was hit, the merchant ship had seen and heard men in the water, but due to the continued threat of the U-boat in the area, made a decision to leave the scene quickly for her own safety. It was a decision that was to prove difficult for the captain of the Cyprian Prince to live with and was debated at the highest levels of the War Cabinet but ultimately decided justifiable in the circumstances. This was shocking news for us and we wondered why life rafts had not been thrown to the aid of those in the water? However, we were able to appreciate that U-22 took many more lives that night and her threat was not to be ignored.

The story unfolded to reveal more information and we were astounded to find that bodies were washed ashore and some 18 of our men were buried in Wick Cemetery - 6 of these being unidentified and 'known' only 'unto God'. So here at last, in the small Scottish town of Wick, was a focal point for our grief - a place where families could gather and unite to pay tribute to their men. This was an opportunity not afforded us 61 years ago, and so

the plans for the Memorial Weekend were put into motion and we made our way north, grateful for a second chance.

On the Friday evening, various groups began to arrive in Wick and we quickly got to know each other. Some of us met special local people, such as Donald Sutherland. As a lad of 10 years old, Donald had been playing truant and as he wandered along from the harbour out to the Shaltigoe Wall made the sad discovery of the bodies of some of those washed ashore. He quietly told how he had witnessed the Exmouth funerals in the Cemetery by hiding behind a wall with his friend. The friend's father housed hunting dogs in kennels adjacent to the cemetery and Donald could not make out how the dogs had remained silent during the moving funeral proceedings – they were notorious for barking uncontrollably at the slightest sound. Later his friend's father revealed that he had drugged the dogs to keep them quiet for the occasion as a mark of respect for those lost. It was incredible to sit with Donald and hear these stories first-hand.

From the moment of our arrival, the people of Wick did their utmost to make us welcome and worked hard to add so many special touches to the proceedings. We reflected on the fact that it was this community who had buried our men with such dignity in January 1940, as hundreds of people lined the streets to pay their respects and they were laid to rest with full military honours.

At least 150 relatives of the crew of HMS Exmouth gathered in Wick and a large contingent met at Wick Harbour on the Saturday morning. The original plan had been for a smaller number of representatives to make the journey out to sea to the site of Exmouth for a service on the water. However, our plans were affected by the weather forecast and the lack of suitable, substantial vessels for tougher sea conditions. Finally, on the advice of Harbour Master Malcolm Bremner, who had spent weeks trying to organise vessels for us, we decided to hold the service by the lighthouse on the harbour wall prior to leaving for sea with a slightly reduced party. This meant that as many people as possible could share in the occasion due to the restrictions the weather forecast now placed on sailing.

During the early part of the day, the sun shone for us – not guaranteed in that part of the world by any means. The Service at the harbour was conducted by Superintendent George Shaw of the Fishermen's Mission in Scrabster. He officiated beautifully and there were several personal touches added by relatives reading special poems and verses which had been carefully selected or written for the occasion. We joined together in the 23rd Psalm and The Lord's Prayer and the sound of the sea and the seagulls overhead brought to mind our men's love of the ocean life. Melissa Shaw, daughter of George, played the Last Post perfectly and we stood in silence. Some relatives laid flowers on the water or along the harbour wall, others gave wreaths to those who were to journey out to sea.

The 36 relatives who were to journey to the site of Exmouth made their way to the other side of the harbour to board two substantial vessels generously provided by local people. 'The Loyal Mediator' was provided by Mark Reeves from the ETDC in Orkney and 'The Boy Andrew' by Wick fisherman, Norman (Norrie) Bremner. The Wick Lifeboat acted as our escort and kindly offered to take 2 additional passengers to increase our numbers. As we left the harbour, relatives waved farewell from the harbour wall. The harbour master and RNLI had arranged some poignant touches - the harbour flag was flying at half-mast and rocket flares were fired high into the sky above the boats.

The journey to the site took about two hours and we chatted and made friends on the way. Aboard 'The Mediator' we received safety instructions and were shown around the vessel. A generous spread of food was provided and we viewed underwater video footage of the wreck of Exmouth – most for the first time. Those sailing on 'The Boy Andrew' received the same high level of hospitality – refreshments and a tour of the vessel with information on how she performed her duties as a working, fishing vessel. Conditions were kind to us and it was a pleasant journey.

As we neared the site, the atmosphere began to change to one of quiet reflection. We made our way to the upper deck, and some saw evidence of Exmouth below us via a sonar-scanner used by the ETDC. Aboard 'The Mediator' we gathered on the upper deck and awaited the arrival of the other vessels, watching 'The Boy Andrew' approach us over the waves in silent anticipation. The two larger vessels pulled alongside each-other and the Lifeboat rested adjacent, to form a kind of triangle.

Aboard 'The Boy Andrew' we could see Mr William Riddell, the most senior of our number, helped to the bow by his daughter to pay his respects to his young brother, David. Here, above the site of the last resting place of our loved-ones, we were finally able to pay our respects. It was the most emotional of experiences and it is difficult to describe the scene. We participated in the Service at Sea together, again officiated by George Shaw, in the same format as previously shared at the harbour. The Service was broadcast via the ships' radios so that we could participate as one. We sang together, we prayed together and we hugged one-another. After the silence, we threw our wreaths and flowers on to the water and reflected, deep in silent thought on the wasted years and what might have been - the loss of so many beautiful lives and the shattering impact of their loss on so many different families. The sea was awash with flowers, petals and cards. Not a soul was forgotten. We thought of all those who could not be with us ... of those who left this life never having gained the comfort of knowing the truth ... and we were joined together in our grief. It was the most moving of scenes and peace came to many for the first time in that special place.

Aboard 'The Boy Andrew' the family of John Wild scattered his ashes into the waves as they said their farewells. John had spent a lifetime researching the loss of his brother Arthur with Exmouth. He passed away this April and had made it known he wanted his ashes scattered at Exmouth's last resting place. Time stood still and the two brothers were finally reunited once more.

As we began the journey back to shore aboard 'The Mediator', diver Mark Reeves fittingly and thoughtfully poured each of his passengers a tot of rum - 'Nelson's Blood'. We raised our glasses and toasted "HMS Exmouth!" The ritual carried with it echoes of an earlier tradition in the Navy of our men. Now the weather began to close in and most of us, deep in reflection, preferred the refuge of the lower decks. We appreciated the earlier advice of our Harbour Master, Malcolm Bremner.

Back at the harbour, the Lifeboat Station laid on hot drinks and refreshments for us – as they had done earlier in the day for those relatives left at the quayside. Their generosity was outstanding. Relatives were able to view the Lifeboat Log referring to events in January 1940. Local television and newspaper reporters recorded interviews with different parties.

That evening a huge number of relatives, divers and researchers met in The Norseman Hotel. We spent the whole evening talking and telling each other our individual family stories. Lasting friendships were forged.

On the Sunday morning at 10 a.m. we attended Wick Cemetery, where some of the Exmouth crew are buried. A very large crowd of people, all formally dressed, quietly gathered – some laying flowers and wreaths on the graves. The sky was dark and overcast, threatening rain, but not a drop fell. At ten prompt, the sound of the bagpipes could be heard in the distance and a lone piper approached along the long footpath. He was followed by the Royal British Legion carrying their flags and the local Church of Scotland minister, The Rev Stevie Thomson.

All officialdom was represented – including The Royal Navy by Commodore Sandford (CBE) and an accompanying party, The Coastguard, The RNLI and the Harbour Master – they stood respectfully back from the families. The Service was conducted along the lines of a funeral. We sang 'Abide With Me' and 'The 23rd Psalm' through our tears. A British Legion representative saluted the War Memorial, laying a wreath of poppies. A Royal Marine bugler played The Last Post and we observed a silence. The piper played 'Flowers of the Forest' before finally solemnly leading the flags out again.

Many laid British Legion poppy crosses for individual family members and these were also placed on behalf of some relatives who could not attend at their request. We stood gazing at the headstones amid a blanket of flowers – but a few known to relatives such as Karen Lewis who knelt at the graveside of her grandfather Alfred George Woodham. For most, however, it was the inscription 'A Sailor of HMS Exmouth – Known Unto God' that focused our thoughts. Was this where our loved-one lay? We would never know for sure, but in a strange way the possibility united all of us in hope and in the knowledge that at last there was a graveside for each of us to visit. We thought back to that day in January 1940 when the people of Wick stood in our places and buried our men as if they had lost their own sons. Today, generations on, we stood in our rightful place – grieving for lost husbands, fathers, brothers, grandfathers, uncles and friends.

Next at 11.30 a.m. we made our way to The Old Parish Church in Wick to attend the formal Memorial Service. The church was packed with a congregation of over 400, including relatives and other local representatives in addition to those who had attended the Cemetery – The Sea Cadets, Local Constabulary and The Royal Naval Association. It was clear from the sensitive manner in which the Service was presented that the Minister, Stevie Thomson, had taken a great deal of time and care in its preparation. He addressed some of the young people present in order to keep the name and memory of the crew of HMS Exmouth alive in the community. There were readings by The Commodore, The Lord Lieutenant of Caithness and Hamish Moore, Master Mariner. During one of the most poignant moments, as we sang 'For Those In Peril On The Sea', 4 Sea Cadets marched into the Church carrying the outstretched 'White Ensign', the highest naval honour. This was posthumously presented to the crew by the Navy. The Ensign was laid-out on the altar and accepted by Stevie Thompson on behalf of the crew – he dedicated it to their memory. It will hang in the church and later there will be an accompanying brass plaque engraved with the names of the entire crew. The minister gave the most moving of sermons and was not afraid to speak the truth. He spoke of the sacrifice of our men in the pursuit of justice and freedom and their stand against evil and tyranny, stating "As long as this Church stands, the men of the Exmouth will be remembered..." The minister's words were so appreciated by relatives in the congregation and again the tears flowed freely. An affinity and a bond were born that day between this newly gathered group of relatives and

the Church community in Wick. Again, The Last Post sounded, followed by a silence and Flowers of the Forest on the pipes and relatives came forward to the altar to lay wreaths and flowers. The sound of 'Reveille' filled the Church and our hearts and the Service concluded as we stood proudly for the National Anthem.

Finally, we gathered together in the Church hall for a reception. Photographs of crew members provided by relatives were displayed together with background information on their lives. There were press cuttings and technical information and photographs of Exmouth. Again, people stood in silent emotion as they found their own relative's details and moved around with interest to find out more about others - reflecting on the fact that many would have been friends, as we too had now become.

The wonderful parishioners provided us with a delicious buffet lunch and took great care of us. We found later that this was not only prepared, but largely funded by the parishioners themselves. After lunch, Chairman Dave Ellis thanked everyone for their support and officially inaugurated the newly formed HMS Exmouth 1940 Association. Many people joined, becoming the first members.

Later, researcher Bob Baird carefully presented the facts surrounding the tragic loss of Exmouth and for many it was the first time they had heard the full details. It was difficult for some to listen to this information, but most agreed it was better for the truth to have been told – not to have done so would have been an injustice to our men. Mark Reeves also showed video footage of his dives to the wreck site and gave more technical information on her condition now. There was reassurance in the sight of the beautiful marine life making it's home in the wreck. As Mark said, "It is most fitting that the site has been transformed from one of death and destruction to a scene of tranquility and life."

As the day came to a close, many felt it was not really the end of a chapter, but actually the beginning of a new one – formed on the goodwill and friendship expressed by so many who came together in the name of 'Exmouth' that weekend. As we each made our individual journeys home, we hoped that the friendship and unity so evident during our time together would continue through the channel of our newly formed HMS Exmouth 1940 Association.

We will never forget the outstanding goodwill and generosity of spirit of the people of Wick. The town will always be special to us and it is impossible to think of a more fitting setting to be associated with the memory of our men. Many of us will return in years to come, but meanwhile the memory of that very special weekend in September 2001 will always be held dear in our hearts and the way we feel about the story of Exmouth has undoubtedly changed forever. We have so many people to thank for helping us at last gain the peace that only a real knowledge and understanding of the truth can bring.