

The HMS Exmouth 1940 Association

Founded September 2001 in Wick, Caithness, Scotland.

October 2002

Issue No 4

Picture this..... A group of people of all age's sat around a patio table, drinking wine, enjoying some late afternoon sunshine and where conversation and laughter flows easily. Nothing unusual about that you may think, however if you were able to eaves drop on their conversation, a clue to this gathering may be observed by the mix of regional accents. The southern, almost 'cockney', voice responding to the soft gaelic Scottish accent that can only belong to an inhabitant of the western isles of the Outer Hebrides.

Perhaps what is unusual is the fact that this group of people had only met the once before but their bond of friendship has been brought about by the events of over sixty years ago. A tragedy where the fathers, uncles and grandfathers of this group of people were numbered amongst the crew of the Exmouth when she was lost to enemy action on a cold January morning off the coast of Wick.

If you were of a religious persuasion you would perhaps paraphrase the words of a preacher who once said...."Out of the darkness came the light" for this truly describes the ethos of friendship of the Association following its foundation last year at the first memorial service.

The scene described above actually happened. After the memorial service held recently in Portsmouth, rather than leave a couple of visitors down from the Isle of Lewis to fend for themselves in unfamiliar surroundings, we were only too happy to extend the offer of hospitality for the Sunday afternoon, which included the use of a 'bouncy castle', but that, as they say, is another story!

The association was formed not to glorify war; it is not commercially motivated and is entirely non-political. Application, at the sum of £5 per annum, is welcomed from anybody with a connection or interest in our ship. Contact details:

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Association News

Dear friends

A very warm welcome to everybody, especially those of you reading your first newsletter from the association. We are pleased to report that the second memorial service was held in Portsmouth over the weekend of 31st Aug / 1st September. It was great to meet up with some old friends and make the acquaintance of those attending for the first time. Those members who were unable to travel to Portsmouth for whatever reason, you were very much in our thoughts and please be assured that the floral tribute that was placed at the naval memorial by Sue Eastwood was done so on behalf of all the members, in memory of the entire crew.

For most people, the weekend started on the Saturday as they made their way to the south coast in some glorious late summer sunshine. Sue and myself manned a reception desk for those members unfamiliar with the delights that the traditional home of the Royal Navy has to offer, and to act as a focal point for the forthcoming events.

It was pleasing that most visitors to the city where the Exmouth was built took advantage of the many attractions, which were situated quite literally, on the doorstep of the Royal Sailors Home Club, our base for the weekend. Note: as an association we have associate membership for a year at this club on No. 5007, any member wishing to use its facilities can do so quoting this number when phoning 023 9282 4231.

The historic dockyard is open to visitors and in addition to the historic ships Victory, Mary Rose, Warrior and Naval museum, a number of visitors took advantage of a harbour tour where today's Royal Navy and dockyard could be observed at close quarters.

That evening there was a large gathering of members and their families in a function room at the Home Club where photographs of the crew and details of the ship were on display. Over a drink, or two, conversations were struck up between strangers from all around the country but all with a common purpose, to perpetuate the memory of our ship and its crew.

A highlight of the evening was the attendance of Mr William Pratt, who as a 13 year old lad and the son of the landlady of the Kingston Tavern in Portsmouth, can still remember his mother's pub being full of sailors in uniform, especially those of the Exmouth who 'adopted' this watering hole when ashore in Pompey, making full use of its dart board. William (Bill) can recall that his job on a Saturday evening was to keep the gramophone records playing and, later in the evening, sneaking down stairs for an illicit drink with some of the crew, and gaining a few boxing lessons from them. He also remembers the day very well when news of the ship's loss reached the pub and the affect it had on his mother who in turn had 'adopted' the boys on the Exmouth.

Some members had had a long day and left early, others stayed on to closing time at the Home Club, an enjoyable evening was spent in some very good company.

Next morning, the weather was again most kind to us, and at 8.30 we gathered at the impressive naval memorial on Southsea common, where the names of those members of the crew, not identified and buried at Wick, are numbered amongst the thousands on this, the nations tribute to the men of the Portsmouth Division lost in WW2, opened by HM the Queen Mother in the 1950's. Note: similar memorials can be found in both Plymouth and Chatham to the men serving from these ports.

This moving service was of a similar format to the that held at sea last year over the site of the wreck with Alex Morrison, nephew of Able Seaman John Morrison, reading the poem "The sea gives up its dead" written by a Caithness Minister at the time of the funerals in Wick, 1940. Margaret Furmanek, daughter of Leading Seaman Walter Andrews, read Psalm 107 "Those who go down to sea in ships.....", and David Ellis, grandson of Stoker 1st class Leslie Darton, read the verse "They shall not grow old....."

This was followed immediately by the haunting strain of the bugle playing 'Last Post' being accompanied by the lowering of the Standard of the Royal Naval Association by their representative. An emotionally charged moment when after more than 60 years the men of the Exmouth were finally honoured in their home port, I defy anybody present to deny that a tear was not shed at this most poignant of moments.

When 'Reveille' sounded on the bugle, which was the signal for Sue to lay the association wreath, every member of the crew was in our thoughts. This was followed by individual floral tributes being laid below the tableau where the names of the crew are inscribed. The service was led by the Rev. Godfrey Hilliard, a serving Chaplain in the Royal Navy, who also took the Holy Communion service in St Anne's Church in the Naval Base, where a number of members elected to attend. Others at their own choice went their separate way.

Later that Sunday morning, we met up again at the Home Club where in the foyer the photographs and information on the ship were again displayed for all to see. Over a welcome cup of tea, more friendships were struck up as again the crew was remembered.

At this point, one of the highlights of the weekend occurred when Mr Frank Cormell, a very sprightly octogenarian was introduced to the gathering. Frank had served on our Exmouth, leaving her only a few months before her loss, this indeed was an emotional link back to our ship. Thank you Frank for taking the trouble to travel from your home in North Wales and we are sorry that due to the ill health of his wife Rita, Gordon French "froggy" another Exmouth rating, was unable to make the re-union and meet up with an old shipmate.

Having held memorial services at both ends of the country to commemorate both the birth and final resting place of our ship over two consecutive years, there are no immediate plans to arrange another get together as an association. Perhaps the Devon town of Exmouth would make a suitable venue for some future meeting, however the stated aim of the association is to raise enough money to commission a memorial plaque of our own to place alongside the Royal Naval ensign and picture of the ship in the custody of the Old Parish Church in Wick.

To this end could I respectfully ask that you send your subscription for 2002/03 to Alex at your earliest opportunity, if you haven't already done so, and at some time in the near future when more accurate costs are known for the memorial plaque, we would like to call upon you for a donation towards the cost, and if successful we will meet again as an association to dedicate this plaque in the church in Wick.

One final request for now, if you have the time and inclination, we would very much like you to "adopt a sailor". By this we mean that of the crew of 189, we have only been in touch with relatives of about 50 of the crew, so a big task is still facing us tracking relatives of the remainder. However if we were all to take one name, available from Sue, and do as much detective work as possible and advertise in a local paper or local radio station, electoral role etc, I'm sure we could track down more relatives. Please contact Sue at your convenience for more details, and good luck.

That's all for now, other than to be the first to wish you all a peaceful Christmas and a Happy New Year on behalf of Sue, Alex and myself.