Brushes with History

(People and ships — and some stories that unite them)

By John Littlefield

MOMENTOUS EVENTS ARE SOMETIMES EMBELLISHED with exaggerated claims such as 'The end of history', suggesting that nothing could surpass what has recently occurred. But there was nothing exaggerated about what happened on the 8th September 2022 and the days that followed when we were struck by the tragic news of the death of Her Majesty the Queen. And while life as we knew it had changed, it didn't stop, and everything that happened from that point on was on a scale difficult to exaggerate. Captivated, we watched Gentlemen at Arms with swan-feather plumes and Yeomen of the Guard with ribboned hats guarding the catafalque as the public, courteous and silent, paid their respects. We witnessed one momentous event after another, many never before seen in public, in a seemingly never-ending stream, and 142 sailors drawing the state gun carriage did us proud. This was no brush with history; this was history in the making, and we were part of it.

2022 also saw the 40th anniversary of the Falklands War, half a lifetime ago, for me. It was an event of great naval significance, one in which many of our friends and colleagues served, and one of many links that unite the islands with the Royal Navy.

When I joined *Ganges* in 1959, it was only 14-years since the end of the Second World War, then a lifetime for me, but that was a war in which our parents fought and served, as did those who substituted for them on arriving at our various training establishments, as witnessed by the decorations on their chests.

Achilles as seen from *Ajax*, during the Battle of the River Plate. Not pictured is the third of the famous River Plate trio, the heavy cruiser *Exeter*. (*Achilles*, loaned to New Zealand in 1936, transferred to the new Royal New Zealand Navy as HMNZS *Achilles* in 1941.) *Image: Public domain.*

But the conversations that we never had with our parents, we never had with them either. The maxim, 'When an elder dies, it is as if a library has burned down,' characterises what we lose when we fail to tap into the experiences of our elders. Usually, when it comes to 'What did you do in the war, Dad?', the last thing on Dad's agenda is to re-live it. Then again, if you don't ask, you'll never know. But I never did ask, 'What was it like, bouncing across the Libyan desert in a tank, Dad?' Or quiz Uncle Len about his time in the *Duke of York* at the Battle of North Cape.

All of us, irrespective of age, will have experienced brushes with history by serving with or simply brushing up against some of those who made it. Some will be national figures, like Lord Louis Mountbatten, but most will be less well known but memorable just the same. And any gaps that Lord Louis left in his account were readily filled by the *Kelly Association* whose members became de facto members of the *Mercury* senior ratings mess, the link being their former captain and, following his death, the then Prince of Wales. They were not without influence.

My instructor throughout my time at *Ganges* was an 'elderly' gentleman of around 36, RS Jock Hunter, who, as a Boy Telegraphist served in HMS *Ajax* where he saw action at the Battle of the River Plate, the Battles of Crete, Malta, and the siege of Tobruk. Jock, very much a father figure, was on his second tour as a *Ganges* instructor. The first time, he and his wife Mary adopted one of the boys who had been orphaned prior to joining. Like most of his contemporaries, Jock, sported a fine display of medals reflecting his wartime service, enhanced by the shine we were tasked to put on them in preparation for Sunday divisions.

Author, drummer on left, with the TS *Battleaxe* band at the opening of the film, The Battle of the River Plate, at a Newbury cinema in 1957.

At the time, I knew little of the war in the Mediterranean, but I did know about the Battle of the River Plate. As a Sea Cadet, I was a drummer in my unit band, marching up the aisles of the local cinema when the eponymously named film debuted there in 1957. But I never did ask Jock, 'What was it like being on watch while at the wrong end of the guns of a pocket battleship?'

The captain during my time at *Ganges* was Captain Hugh Mackenzie. My contact with the great man was during work ship weeks, one week as his messenger, the second skivvying at his house. In 1941, the then Lieutenant Mackenzie took command of the submarine *Thrasher* based at Alexandria, soon finding himself in the thick of the action in the highly dangerous waters of the Mediterranean.

Vice Admiral Sir Hugh Mackenzie KCB DSO* DSC in 1941, as a Lieutenant in command of HM Submarine *Thrasher*. *Image: Public Domain*

His most famous action was when *Thrasher* was engaged off Crete by surface escorts and aircraft following an attack on a German merchant vessel. Believing that they had evaded their attackers, investigation upon surfacing revealed two unexploded bombs, one on the casing forward of the gun mounting, and a second trapped between the casing and the pressure hull. Mackenzie had no alternative but to put the lives of two of his men, if not the whole crew, at high risk to remove them. The First Lieutenant, Lieutenant Peter Roberts, and Petty Officer Thomas Gould, volunteered. And as if manhandling two unexploded bombs wasn't enough, both men had to lower themselves and work their way between the casing and the pressure hull to where the second bomb lay. If the bomb exploded, all would be lost. And if they were sighted and attacked, Mackenzie would be forced to dive the submarine, drowning the two men trapped below the casing.

Initially, Mackenzie did not make much of the incident in his patrol report, merely commending Roberts and Gould for their 'excellent conduct'. The incident was forgotten until several months later, when, as Mackenzie recalled, he was shaken by the news that both men had both been awarded the Victoria Cross. 'A great personal honour to themselves and, as they and I felt, also to their fellow submariners.' 'I never expected to get the VC,' Gould is reported to have said. 'When we came down from the casing, we were soaking wet. All the captain said was, "You'd better get yourselves dried"'.

It was the C-in-C Mediterranean, Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham, who, on receipt of Mackenzie's report, believed that Roberts and Gould's action was worthy of the Victoria Cross. The Honours and Awards Committee in London argued that the act of bravery had not been performed in the presence of the enemy as the Victoria Cross Rules stipulate and that the George Cross would be more appropriate. Cunningham replied that two large enemy bombs in a submarine off an enemy coastline constituted quite enough enemy presence.

During his six patrols in *Thrasher*, in which he was awarded the DSO and bar, Mackenzie sank more than 40,000 tons of enemy shipping, including Mussolini's yacht *Diana,* a 2,500-ton sloop of the Italian Regia Marina. His next command was *Tantalus* in the Far East where he earned the distinction of conducting the longest patrol of any British submarine during the war, covering 11,692 miles during 55 days at sea.

Promoted to Rear Admiral in 1961 he was appointed Flag Officer Submarines, after which he accepted the challenge of introducing the concept of Polaris into the Royal Navy—starting from a blank piece of paper. Once, on lecturing a group of young engineers on the advantages of the stable home life offered by serving in a Resolution Class with their three-month operating cycle, one wag in the audience worked out that given the cycle, he would never be at home for the birth of his children. `Never mind,' retorted the Admiral, 'I promise that I will have you there for the conception!' We last met when he was visiting *Hermes* in 1964 by which time he had been elevated to Vice Admiral and me to RO1, but I never did ask him what it was like having a bomb lodged in his casing.

Ordinary Signalman Ted Briggs on survivors leave, June 1941. Image courtesy HMS Hood Association

The killick of the Comms Mess in *Hermes* at the time was Harry, another elderly gentleman, who, as a 16-year-old Boy Telegraphist, served in HMS *Hood* in the late 1930s. *Hood's story* is well known, her engagement with *Bismarck* and the subsequent chase is arguably one of the most famous of the Second World War. Harry left *Hood* long before her loss, but did we youngsters ever sit down with him and ask those 'What was it like' questions? Of course not.

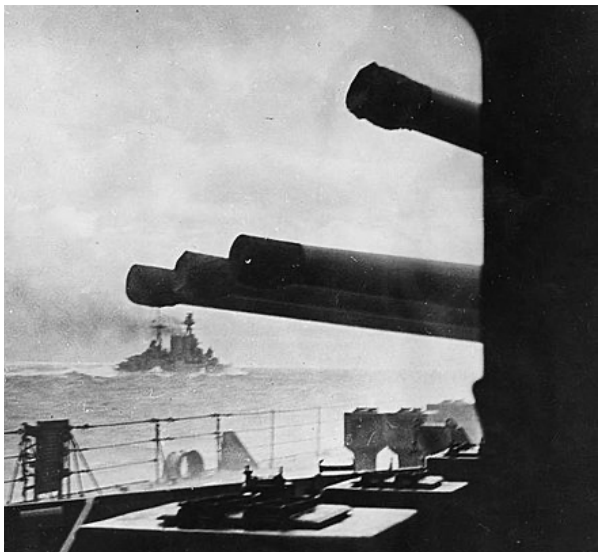
But many were asked, formally and otherwise, of the late Lieutenant Ted Briggs, who, as an Ordinary Signalman was one of the three survivors of *Hood's* final action along with Able Seaman Bob Tilburn and Midshipman William Dundas.

Many of us would have known Ted towards the end of his career and in his retirement. The romantic notions running through 12-year-old Ted's mind in the summer of 1935 when sighting the *Mighty Hood* anchored off Redcar, and the realisation of his dream when drafted to her from *Ganges* as a Boy Signalman in 1939 are easy to imagine. Not so the horrors of her destruction and the trauma of his survival two-years later.

CPO (Tel) John McNulty, HMS *Hood*
Image courtesy HMS Hood Association

Each of the 1,415 men lost in the battle, from Vice Admiral Lancelot Holland to the many boy ratings that perished, are remembered in many ways. Among this tragic loss were the two Communications branch chiefs CPO Telegraphist John McNulty and Chief Yeoman of Signals George Carn. John McNulty was born on 21st November 1908 in Tynemouth, where he worked as a miner before joining *Ganges* on 21st August 1925. John joined *Hood* on 8th September 1936 as an Acting Leading Telegraphist, rising to CPO Telegraphist on 7th March 1941, just three months before *Hood's* final battle. He was 32-years-old at the time of his loss.

Chief Yeoman of Signals George Carn (no photo available), was born on 18th July 1901 in Chichester. He joined *Ganges* on 13th July 1917 and saw service in both world wars. From April 1918 to October 1919, George served in the battleship *Queen Elizabeth* as a Boy/Ordinary Signalman and joined *Hood* on 2nd June 1939 as a Yeoman of Signals. George was rated Chief Yeoman of Signals on 7th October 1940. He was 39-years-old at the time of his loss.



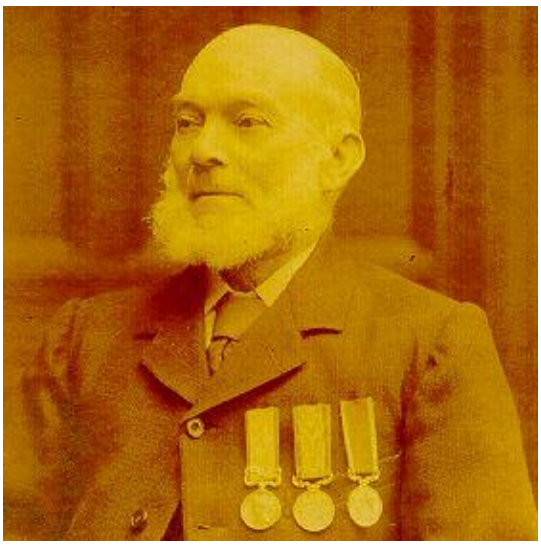
Hood going into action against *Bismarck* and *Prinz Eugen*, 24th May 1941. This image taken from the *Prince of Wales* was the last photo taken of *Hood*. The four guns in the foreground are those of *Prince of Wales's* 'A' turret.
Image: public domain.

Mostly, history comes to us through the pens of historians, politicians, admirals and generals—sometimes written as it actually was—rarely do we get the views of Stoker Fred Smith and Trooper Tommy Atkins featuring among the best-sellers. We are rightly horrified by what we know about the dreadful lives of soldiers in the trenches, but little thought is given to the likes of Fred in the boiler rooms and upper decks of tiny warships that were tossed around in mid-Atlantic while facing certain death if struck by torpedo, mine or shell. This type of service required a different kind of courage from that needed on the Western Front, though it was no less vital for the outcome of the war. And while there will be very few, if any, alive today who handled the shovel, the devil, the ash-rake and the slice in the arduous conditions of war, one who did, was a young stoker whose name actually was Fred Smith. Fred was born in West Ham, London, in August 1894 living in the grinding poverty of the East End until he joined the Royal Navy in 1913. Unbeknownst to anyone, some fifty-years after the events he described, Fred wrote an account of his experiences in the stokeholds of ships, large and small, throughout the First World War and the years immediately after, his writings being discovered by his family after his death in 1970 and subsequently published as *Smudge's Story* by his granddaughter and great nephew in 2014.

From Tudor carracks to Lowestoft trawlers, Britain's historic fleet is a magnificent collection of vessels, each with its own place in history and a destination for many, who, like pilgrims, tread the decks and absorb the atmosphere of ships in which their forebears lived and often died. Beryl Dykes, wife of Warrant Officer (Retd) Jeff Dykes, is one such pilgrim whose own brush with history is through her great great grandfather, Robert Turrell, a seaman, born in Suffolk in 1835, his own place in history firmly secured in the family archive.

Stoker Fred Smith, 1894-1970
Image courtesy the Rogers family

Robert joined the Merchant Navy in 1849 aged 14, then, bored with just sailing from port to port, and now a trained seaman, he transferred to the Royal Navy in 1853. First serving in HMS *Tribune*, a wooden steam frigate of 30-guns, he then joined HMS *Princess Royal*, a 91-gun second rate ship of the line in which he saw service in the Crimean War, including that almost forgotten part, the Baltic Campaign. In December 1859, Robert joined HMS *Magaera,* an iron steam screw frigate where he was promoted to Petty Officer and Captain of the foretop, leader of one of the elite teams of '*Topmen*'. In August 1861 he joined HMS *Warrior,* again as Captain of the foretop, serving until November 1864 when the ship paid off at the end of her first commission. Commenting on his time in *Warrior*: 'For a brand-new ship, this was a great honour, but service in *Warrior* led to a level of boredom not seen since my merchant navy days. *All scrubbing, polishing and very little "warshipping"'.*



Robert Turrell, 1835-1922
Image courtesy Beryl Dykes

Little did Robert know that his pithy observation would sum up over a hundred-years of naval history. But what lay behind it, and what lay ahead? Perhaps Robert was casting a misty eye back to a time when Britain's fleets were in a state of near continuous action. But when he made his comment in 1864, the navy had not been involved in a major fleet action since Trafalgar in 1805 and neither would it be until Jutland in 1916. This was *Pax Britannica,* when the Empire was the global hegemonic power, and Britain's dominant position in world trade was underpinned by the Industrial Revolution and a navy that enjoyed unchallenged sea power.

Ruling the waves with a well turned-out and disciplined fleet sounds like mission accomplished, the pay-off for years of harsh active service. *Pax Britannica* was a good thing, the clue is in the title, but for the navy, it was a period of over-regulation, the proliferation of petty rules, and the punctilious perfection of time-honoured ceremonial, which, with scrubbing and polishing, the void of 'very little warshipping' was filled. And while this was largely the case for a navy which was held in high esteem, on distant stations and away from the main fleets and the public eye, more warshipping and less scrubbing and polishing did occur. Skirmishes there were a plenty, with future leaders such as Jacky Fisher, George Callaghan, John Jellicoe, Cecil Burney and David Beattie, cutting their teeth in localised actions. One of the longest, most altruistic and least known campaigns in military history also occurred: the Royal Navy's dogged efforts to deny the open seas to slave traders. Rightly, this loathsome crime is the focus of much contemporary debate, but it's one from which the Royal Navy's heroic role in doing much to secure its abolition, has been largely obscured, or worse, redacted.

By the late 1890s, as the long calm lee of Trafalgar was drawing to a close, almost every officer of promise below the rank of captain, and certainly all the future flag officers at Jutland, were developing their careers, but they were unable to flourish in the tradition of their battle-proven 18th century counterparts. By 1914, with technology having accelerated naval warfare beyond the imagination of most minds that were nurtured in the fourth quarter of the 19th century, commanders began hostilities without a profound understanding of the capabilities and limitations of their ships, their weapons and indeed themselves.

At the end of the long peace, with the navy having scrubbed and polished itself into a stupor, the culture that permeated Jellicoe's fleet at Jutland, a complex 20th century operation fought with a 19th century mentality and a signalling system that was in large part 18th, was rather different to that which infused Nelson's over a century earlier. But Nelson raised his juniors above the need of supervision, in a style of leadership that the authoritarian lights of Britain's imperial century would have found subversive. And while Nelson only had surface actions to consider, so too did his opponents. But where Nelson achieved, they failed, the Royal Navy's long years at sea, with well drilled and practised crews, underpinned with a style of leadership which was, in effect, a force multiplier, all evidenced by the line-up and final score at Trafalgar.

When war came in 1914, expectations of the navy were high, but something of a shadow was to be cast over Jellicoe's fleet. To begin with, Jellicoe was appalled at the way in which Churchill, First Lord of the Admiralty, ordered him to succeed the fleet commander, Admiral Sir George Callaghan, who was bitterly disappointed not to command his fleet in the war he had readied it for. And rather than a 'Band of Brothers' there was discord; leadership within the fleet, at least in part, was found wanting. At Jutland, Beatty wouldn't talk to his subordinates, his subordinates wouldn't use their loaves, and Rear Admiral Sir Robert Arbuthnot mindlessly led the 1st Cruiser Squadron to near total destruction in the navy's answer to the Charge of the Light Brigade. Of the 6,094 Royal Navy seamen killed at Jutland, 1,831, including his own, were from his squadron. And while Jutland was a strategic victory, it wasn't the second Trafalgar that the country expected.

Brushes with history can take many forms and turns. Returning to Robert Turrell, as *Warrior's* Captain of the Foretop, he would be well known to the ship's officers. Captain Arthur Cochrane, with his own place in history secured, not only as the first captain of the world's most powerful warship, but as the son of Admiral Thomas Cochrane, 10th Earl of Dundonald, that brilliant, daring and somewhat colourful officer. Spoken of by some in the same breath as Nelson, this 'Fighting Captain' of the Napoleonic Wars was the inspiration for 20th century novelists, famously living through C. S. Forester's Horatio Hornblower and Patrick O'Brian's epic series of Jack Aubrey adventures.

Perhaps better known to Robert would have been the ship's Executive Officer, Commander George Tryon, a brilliant, larger than life officer whose incisive and challenging style struck fear into others, and therein lay a problem. In 1893, as Vice Admiral Sir George Tryon and Commander of the Mediterranean Fleet, while flying his flag in HMS *Victoria*, he was responsible for a tragic blunder which cost the lives of 358 men, including his own. While performing a poorly conceived fleet manoeuvre, *Victoria* was rammed and sunk by *Camperdown*. His

subordinates were frightened to tell him that he was wrong. One survivor of this disaster was *Victoria's* executive officer, Commander John Jellicoe. Robert would undoubtedly have witnessed the Commander's character on a daily basis as indeed he would of another of *Warrior's* officers, the immense character and personality that would influence the shape and sustained dominance of the navy as war approached, Lieutenant Jacky Fisher, the ship's Gunnery Officer.

On a lighter note, Robert's career covered the period in which the life of a bluejacket eventually turned into a decent career, and a nice girl might now love a sailor without distressing her mother too much. Robert retired from the Navy in 1880, the proud possessor of Crimean, Turkish and Baltic campaign medals. He died in 1922 aged 87. As highly regarded in death as he was in life, his coffin, draped in the Union Jack, was borne on a naval gun carriage to his last resting place at Ann's Hill cemetery in Gosport. A Royal Marine bugler sounded the last post at his graveside.

Everyone will have their Jock Hunters and Harrys off the *Hood* and explored the links that connect them to memorable events, ships or people. Stoker Smith and Petty Officer Turrell paint word pictures of two distinct generations of seaman, one of the age of sail, the other of steam. But whoever we do or don't tap into, their memories and stories will remain an invaluable part of our history, all worth keeping alive, and all part of who we are.

All who have served in ships will have little doubt that they are living things with personalities that somehow turn them into objects of affection. That a man-made object, fabricated from sheets of metal or planks of wood and full of machines, can possess the nobler aspects of their creators is perhaps fanciful to some, but not to those who served in ships the purpose of which made them rather more than just a home. Ships will have their own brushes with history, some, like people, will have chapters all to themselves. So, does a ship have memories? probably not. Does a ship evoke memories? Absolutely. Doing rounds, alone, in a ship at night, perhaps one that has seen action and pain—*are* you alone? Of course, you are!