

RN Boy Seamen WW2 Memorial

GI Jim REED is championing a proposal, which has been approved, to erect an RN Boy Seamen Memorial in Portsmouth Cathedral, Southsea. The memorial will be in the form of a stone floor plaque in the Cathedral in memory of the 534 Royal Naval Boy Seamen, aged 16 and 17 years who were killed by enemy action during WW2, serving on 80 warships. The plan also includes a Book of Remembrance which will list the Warships and the Boy's details. Also in the Book is a short personal account of life as a Boy Seaman in that war, written by one who survived. Jim states in his letter: I have many things to thank the Royal Navy for. At the age of 14 years I became homeless and with a few possessions spent some months slumming through jobs and sleeping rough.

I applied to join the Royal Navy, aged 15 years, entering the Portsmouth Division at HMS St VINCENT. It was here I gained my basic training, learning to obey the strict rules and received 3 half days off in 14. My allowance, after deductions for clothing and shoes and board was 1 shilling (5p) per week in my pocket. If you were found to be carrying more than 2 shillings on you, you had to forfeit the extra amount! I graduated to a RN Ordinary Seaman in 1939 and served in numerous Theatres of War during WW2.



Royal Navy Boys Service

In many quarters of present life today, there are many events from recent history, due perhaps to the very full lives we now enjoy, that remain unknown or lost to history. One such event; which played a very important and vital role to the Royal Navy, was always its manpower requirements. Unlike the press-gangs of way back, who acted as unofficial recruitment staff to persuade many men to come along and enjoy a better life, this article moves far from those times and deals within the last 100 years and how the Royal Navy had a ready source of highly trained boys 16 to 18 years old to be drafted and serve on mostly capital ships, ie ships above destroyer class.

These boys had recruited at the age of 15 to 15 and a quarter and were highly trained for 9 months in seamanship, gunnery, field training, etc and after passing all examinations at a high pass level were drafted to H.M. Ships. They were highly trained and disciplined, had a messdeck area clear of the crew. Their training continued in all aspects of a warship's routines and were allocated to be a member of gun's crews, controls, messengers and the many other requirements and became very proficient in their duties changing around to other duties to gain more experience and skills.

By the time they had reached the age of 18, they began their men's service of 12 years and joined the rest of the crew. Their promotion at 18 years old was to an Ordinary Seaman with an increase in pay and conditions. This had taken them 3 years of strict training and discipline to achieve. From September 1939 they would be involved in a World War.

A little on The Training Establishments' for Boys: The training of Boys goes back well before WW2. Most training and accommodation was carried out on the old wooden ships which were totally unsuitable in those days resulting in a high mortality rate and also the added problem of a shortage of sick-bay facilities. The welcome change to land based establishments goes back to the early 1900's. H.M.S. Ganges, the largest training establishment situated at Shotley near Ipswich became a Stone Frigate about 1923. Its predecessor, the Wooden Hulk of the same name had been in use for 7 years. HMS St Vincent, situated at Gosport, Hants, also now classed as a Stone Frigate was commissioned in June 1927. These two establishments carried out the bulk of the Boy's training. H.M.S. Caledonia at Rosyth was purchased as S.S. Majestic from the scrap merchants in 1936, the deal made in the absence of no money by the Admiralty, was to compensate the scrap merchant by matching the ship's tonnage by similar tonnage resulting in several destroyers, etc going for scrap and leaving the Navy short of some vital ships for The Battle of the Atlantic. Pouring salt on the wounds, H.M.S. Caledonia had a fire in 1939 which destroyed her to the waterline. At the start of WW2 Boys

were evacuated from these establishments going to the Isle of Man to finish their training. St. Vincent re-opened 1 December 1945 and decommissioned on 2 April 1969. Ganges re-opened after the War and decommissioned in 1976. The main aim of these training establishments was to train boys of 15-16 years old and become efficient and responsible sailors in The Fleet. All the Boys joining the R.N. were all volunteers aged 15-16 years and to have had their parent's permission to do so. There were some discrepancies of who gave permission for those in Children's Homes, those homeless, those whose parents had broken up and other reasons. But it would appear that, looking through Nelson's blind eye, this problem was cleared. No Boy was turned down. The recruitment interview, mostly held at the nearest centre, was a written exam, oral exam and a medical. Those who passed were sent home and were informed quite quickly of the results together with a start date and a rail pass for their destination. Each Boy had to sign to join the R.N. for a period of 12 years from the age of 18 years old - so virtually 15 years' service - and given the King's shilling. Their training started as soon as they passed through the gates. The Boys had come from various life styles; those who had come from good homes and families took longer to adjust to this hard regime as opposed to other more hardened Boys who helped them to cope.

The first 6 weeks of training as a Boy 2nd Class, the very lowest, was the most difficult period. No leave given or parent's visits. Letters were the only contact outside the gate. After this quarantine period, shore leave was established for one Saturday, Sunday, and Wednesday each fortnight from 1300 hrs to 1800 hrs. Before leaving, all the Boys were fallen in on the Parade Ground and, what appeared as double slow time, inspected, finding all possible faults to be corrected. Boys were, at last, released to the outside world, less 15 minutes or so of their shore leave. Also, the Riot Act was read out and items such as places "out of bounds", was a mystery that was solved later, although, still a mystery!

The Boys were not likely to cause much trouble. The pay was 5 shillings and 3 pence a week but only 1 shilling (5p) was given to them, the remainder was retained as a credit and went on to pay for upkeep of kits etc. No Boy was allowed to have more than 2 shillings and 6 pence in his possession at any time. On their return from shore leave all Boys had to be promptly inside the Gate and individually inspected and searched, breath smelt for traces of having had a puff of "baccy". To smell of tobacco or have any in possession was considered a serious crime and disobeying the Riot Act. The punishment was usually 'cuts' (corporal punishment with a stout bamboo pole, which was used until 1967) and a spell of jankers ie punishment.

Another interesting aspect was when a few 'boys' decided the Navy was not for them, they absconded. (about 15 years too soon!). Parents would be informed and, in most cases, the local Police Force (one man on his bike) detained him until the Navy escorted him back to HMS St. Vincent. Punishment was harsh as this was considered a serious offence. After such transgressions at an early age, all were highly trained and efficient when their service commenced aboard Warships.

Looking back in history, it seems that the mortality rate of Boys between 15 and 18 years old was a serious problem. In many cases, the cause of death was given as illness and by tracing Death Certificates causes were still not clear. It must be assumed that during the period after the end of the Great War conditions were by no means healthy and many homes not fit to live in and seriously overcrowded, damp and barely heated. It was the breeding ground for illness to spread with killers such as tuberculosis, pneumonia, pleurisy, influenza epidemics and others, with deaths occurring in rapid time. There were also deaths by other causes such as accidents and drowning. In the period January 1922 to, August 1939, Boys who died through illness before 18 years old was 138, and other causes 25. In the years September 1939 to September 1945 534 Boys were killed in action and 24 died of other causes.

Dedication of the memorial is at 1100 on Sunday 18th. March 2012 at Portsmouth Anglican Cathedral in Old Portsmouth. We will be parading our Standard and hopefully fielding a large squad of St. Vincent lads parading adjacent to our colleagues from HMS Ganges. It will be a day to remember for you, your ladies and your families.

"I have a lot to thank the Royal Navy for and their Naval Boy's Training. It set me on a path of life I will never forget or regret. There were many boys like me who entered this "career", but, unlike me, never achieved their potential in life. These boys were cut down before ever making the grade of Ordinary Seaman at the age of 18 years. Many of these 'Boys' would have been trained at HMS St Vincent, as indeed I was."

The total cost for this project is £8000 and Jim is seeking donations for this worthy project for an overlooked group of young War Heroes. If you wish to help with the funding you may do so:

By cheque made out to "THE RN BOYS MEMORIAL FUND" and sent to the Project Manager, Mr J H REED, 10 Cheltenham Gardens, Hedge End, Southampton, Hants, SO30 2UR

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