

## Lest we forget

Lloyd's List Viewpoint 27 July 15 with permission of LL and the author, Cachalot Michael Grey

There was a brief exchange of correspondence in the London *Daily Telegraph* the other day sparked by a reproving letter from one Peter Calkin, who deplored the lack of any mention of the Merchant Navy in “the welter of commemorations” for various battles and wars in which these civilian seafarers had been involved.

Perhaps he had been reading the words of the Master of the Honourable Company of Master Mariners, Captain Jim Conybeare, who noted the “grave error” of the BBC for their commentators’ inability to make any mention of the Merchant Navy in their broadcast of the ANZAC Day commemoration from the Cenotaph, on the centenary of the Gallipoli landings.

My old friend Captain Brian McManus, who was an apprentice aboard a ship which was involved in the D Day landings and who regularly attends the inter-service commemorations where these elderly participants meet, also sometimes complains about the lack of recognition for the role of the MN in many such events. It is if the role of this “fourth arm of defence” had been airbrushed from history, even though their ships and their crews were exposed to grave danger every day that the hostilities in both wars endured.

The year 1982 and the Falklands war should not be beyond the comprehension and memory of many, but here too, with the exception of the role of P&O’s *Canberra* and Cunard’s *QE2*, the merchant ships and their complements “taken up from trade” tend to be forgotten. We commemorated the Battle of Waterloo this month, but nobody mentioned how the British army got to that field in Belgium, before the Shuttle under the Channel had been thought of.

Maybe we shouldn’t be surprised, in an era when history is poorly taught and very selective, that such gaps in public consciousness arise. I was reading a report in a newspaper last week about a poll which discovered quite amazing ignorance among teenagers about the Battle of Britain. Even regular appearances by the surviving Spitfires and Hurricanes at air shows around the country gave those questioned few clues about even the century in which the conflict took place. Perhaps nobody was allowed to look it up on Google.

Indiana is an American state, with no coastline and a very long way from the sea. But just this month, when we were grumbling about the way our merchant navy was forgotten, its Republican Congresswoman Susan W Brooks was in Washington, introducing legislation that would award the Congressional Gold Medal to “Merchant Mariners serving during World War II”. She is also a co-sponsor of a bill that would provide the surviving WWII merchant mariners, who have not hitherto enjoyed “veteran’s benefits” with a one-off \$25,000 benefit, which may have been a very long time coming, but will doubtless be very welcome to these elderly folk. So perhaps there is a lesson from America that ought to resonate nearer to home.

Why does the vital role of the merchant marine always get shoved aside and ignored as past victories (and defeats) are given due honour? I suppose one answer is that while in the UK there is still an army, navy and air force, which enjoys considerable public esteem and can make a noise about its history, the merchant navy effectively disappeared in the 1980s, paying off its British manpower as it closed down, or sidled off to convenient flags and cheap foreign crews. With this generation of seafarers, forced to seek a living as mercenary mariners under different flags, the continuity and shared sense of history was diluted, if not lost. I know there has been what we like to describe as a “renaissance” of the Red Ensign under the tonnage tax regime, but most British ships these days seem to be run by people from the “labour supplying countries”, with Brits about as rare as hens’ teeth. So when there is some egregious failure to afford recognition to what the MN did in the past, it will tend to go uncorrected, unless it is picked up by somebody willing to fire off a verbal reproof.

Maybe the Heritage Lottery Fund might make a difference? This is not me being cynical again, but a reference to an HLF bid by The Wellington Trust which looks after the Hon. Company of Master Mariners’ headquarters ship, moored on the London Embankment at Temple. One of the objectives of the Trust is to educate the nation about the history of the Merchant Navy and it is hoped to develop part of the ship into a permanent public exhibition which will inform people about what the MN did (and does) for the United Kingdom, in peace and war. The grant, if successful, will facilitate this development. There is already a regular schools programme and a number of smaller exhibitions, the latest being on the role of hospital ships in war, have demonstrated the feasibility of the scheme.

The ship itself may well be soon on the move, a voyage of 50m downstream, to a new mooring, to make way for the Garden Bridge which awaits planning permission and which will link North and South banks of the Thames. It is anticipated that the ship will then be ideally situated to capitalise on the “footfall” which will flock to this new horticultural attraction. So in the future, when there is a commemoration of some famous event, there will be less excuse for ignorance about the role of commercial shipping and how merchant mariners made it all possible.

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