

Just a thought.

“Nothing is more trying, to a Seaman, both in the King’s and in the Merchant’s service, than the manner in which the best and ablest hands are turned adrift the moment their labours are no longer required”

These words were written by a seaman (William Hunter) more than two hundred years ago and reflected his own bitter experience after the war with France which ended in 1815 – after some 22 years of conflict. The Treaty of Amiens in 1802 brought a few months of “peace” and – true to form – as the guns fell silent during this brief lull Royal Naval seamen were paid off in the thousands with no thought given to the resulting hardship for them and their families. Many were merchant seafarers who had been “impressed” at the outbreak of the Napoleonic Wars by the Government approved Press Gangs which had legal authority to take by force any seafaring man for service on a naval ship. In those days, life aboard a naval ship was not for the faint-hearted and there was very little inducement for any sailor to enter His Majesty’s Service.

Thus, on the outbreak of hostilities, a “Hot Press” would be staged at a naval port. The town would be sealed by soldiers and marines, allowing the Press Gang to seize all fit men – seafarers or not – and herd them into a guard house where they would be examined by a naval surgeon and a Magistrate and “cripples, lunatics, apprentices and tradesmen” released. The others -irrespective of experience – would be taken aboard ship. Without the organised “Press Gang” any Naval Officer could take what men he needed from a merchant ship and it was not unknown for a naval frigate to intercept a merchantman, returning from many months overseas, before she berthed at her destination port, and impress many of the weary seafarers, leaving just enough to allow her to berth.

The failure of “The Treaty of Amiens” some fourteen months after it was signed, in March 1802, by Britain, France, Spain and The Netherlands signalled a resumption of the Napoleonic Wars and the impressment of those who had been discharged a few months earlier resumed instantly, only for the survivors to be discharged yet again the instant peace was declared.

Most historians acknowledge that the Battle of the Atlantic was possibly the most crucial campaign of WW2 and, in his victory broadcast in May 1945, Winston Churchill said “ My friends, when our minds turn to the Western Approaches, we will not forget the devotion of our merchant seamenso rarely mentioned in the headlines” In his memoirs he comments “ We never call on the officers and men of the Merchant Navy in vain” and, on October 30th. 1945, Parliament carried a Resolution “That the thanks of this House be accorded to the officers and men of the Merchant Navy for the steadfastness with which they have maintained our stocks of food and materials; for their services in transporting men and munitions to all the battles over all the seas, and for the gallantry with which, though a civilian service, they met and fought the constant attacks of the enemy.”

Indeed, no Allied wartime service was in action longer or suffered a higher percentage of casualties than the British Merchant Navy. Some 30,248 merchant seafarers were killed in action and officers and men of the Merchant Navy were awarded: 5 George Crosses, 213 Distinguished Service Crosses, 18 Distinguished Service Orders, 1077 Orders of The British Empire, 1717 British Empire Medals, 50 Commanders of The British Empire ...and 120 Knighthoods.

The survival of the strategic island bastion of Malta was credited to the convoys of merchant ships and their Royal Navy escorts when Sir William Dobbie, wartime Governor of Malta, declared “The work which this magnificent service did, in conjunction with the Royal Navy, in bringing supplies to Malta cannot be overstated. Without that help, Malta could not have held out - the debt the Empire owes to the Merchant Navy is immense”.

Of course, all of that was a very long time ago and, in the interim, much has changed. No longer does the Red Ensign predominate on the trade routes of the globe and, over the years, the number of UK registered seafarers has declined dramatically. A recent article in the Numast “Telegraph” warns that “Britain’s flagging power as a seafaring nation could put the country’s economic security at risk” and goes on to point out that “ decades of decline in the number of British-registered vessels means the UK’s Merchant Navy is becoming so depleted that our economy could be held to ransom by other nations with stronger shipping industries”.

The United Kingdom is dependent upon seafaring traffic (and seafarers) for 95% of our supply of “critical goods, including food, oil and gas for heating, and even military equipment” and, according to Government data we now rank 19th in the table of countries with sizeable merchant fleets – with 13.7 million dwt., representing 0.8% of the global fleet. More alarmingly, however, is the huge decline in the number of UK registered seafarers: today there are about 23,000 UK Officers and ratings compared with 73,400 some 40 years ago.

More than 11,000 Certificates of Equivalent Competency have been issued to foreign Officers to allow them to serve aboard UK registered vessels at a time when hundreds of British Officers are unemployed (and newly qualified Officers are struggling to find that first job). UK seafaring ratings are faring even worse and many are struggling to find gainful employment in the deep-sea industry where Asian and Eastern European domiciled seafarers are predominant.

Despite this, the industry has launched its “UK Maritime Careers Awareness Programme” employing more than 300 volunteer “Careers at Sea Ambassadors” (under the auspices of The UK Merchant Navy Training Board.) All are past or current seafarers and they provide information about careers in the Merchant Navy to schools, youth clubs and career fairs throughout the United Kingdom. With today’s disclosures relating to the cost of, and debts incurred by, studying for a University degree, the fact that one can take a foundation degree in Engineering without any cost (“You learn while you’re earning”) is certainly appealing -but time will tell.

It is said that the ship’s company of one of the largest passenger liners – a regular visitor to Southampton- (built in the United Kingdom but not wearing a Red Ensign) - comprises 26 nationalities and that many of the huge container ships sailing under a variety of flags with crews of 24 (plus or minus) can count six different nationalities amongst their manning.

And the “thought”? Well, in the advent of hostilities involving the United Kingdom, how many of today’s foreign seafarers will continue to man the ships carrying vital supplies of food etc. to these islands and “meet and fight the constant attacks of the enemy” despite the fact that THEIR own country is not involved ? And if they do not – who will?