The Crème de la Crème of Memorials

My introduction to this article must start in the year 1941. I was 16 yrs old and I was home on summer vacation from the Lord Wandsworth College, when I received my notice to start my training for the Merchant Navy. I left my home in a small village in the Worcestershire countryside called “North Piddle”. It lay some seven miles from Worcester on the Stratford on Avon road and I made my way to Pershore Railway Station to catch a train to Sharpness in Gloucestershire to start my two months training…

Although my connections with the village finished there, (apart from the occasional visit) it seemed to me to be the right and proper place for me to pay my respects and homage to shipmates that were not so lucky as I was, returning home in one piece at the end of the war.

There was no cenotaph in the churchyard at North Piddle to lay a wreath; the nearest one was at the next village of Flyford Flavell. To me this was great shame and something had to be done about it to put it right.

The easiest and quickest way to do this, was to purchase a small wooden MN Plaque and get the necessary permission to have it installed on the inside of the church wall, with a wall hook beneath it to place a wreath. With the help of the Vicar, the Revd. David Hassell and the local church council lead by Mrs. Karen Thompson, this was duly done, and the dedication service was quite a village event. Claines R.B.L. took a leading role, Denys Jones did a wonderful job acting as Parade Marshall and organising the parade. Thirteen Standards, consisting of local RBL and RNAssoc’s took part, Denys also did the MN the great honour by parading our National Standard and we were most grateful of the super job he made of it.

Admiral Sturdee and Commodore Bradford read the Bible readings and Commander Hall gave the address from the pulpit. The Village put on a wonderful spread prior to the service, which was most appreciated and really made the day. Thank you ladies.

The Midland Branch of the Merchant Navy Assoc. then decided that we should have a memorial in the midland area, Trips to Liverpool or London was a costly venture. The City of Birmingham was the obvious choice. I, together three associates was given the job to organise it.

This time the memorial took the shape of a headstone and was placed in between two existing memorials and had to be in keeping with them and is situated in St. Paul’s Church yard in the Jewellery Quarter of Birmingham. Local RBL’s, RN, and MN Assoc. were invited to contribute and the required sum of money was soon collected.

The dedication service was on the 19th. March 2000 and was attended by The Lord Mayor of Birmingham, the Mayor of Solihull and other local dignitaries, again Claines took a prominent roll and Denys Jones did magnificent job of Parade Marshall.

As a member of the George Cross Island Association I helped in the final preparations, when Her Gracious Majesty the Queen, unveiled the Liberty Bell in Valletta Malta in 1992. At the dinner given by His Excellency President of Malta the following evening I was introduced to the late Lord Lewin, Admiral of the Fleet also President of the National GCIA. by our national secretary, Peter Rothwell. Lord Lewin spoke of the admiration he had the courage and devotion to duty of the merchant navy crews during the war years.

He commented on the fact that all HM services had memorials in Malta but not the MN, Why? The answer of course, was that the MNA only been formed four years prior, and unfortunately this was not a priority at that moment, but now in the year 2001 it is.

The MNA and the GCIA virtually joined forces when Peter Rothwell, the secretary of the GCIA and Capt David Young the MN Vice President asked me to put this right. Not only was this project going to be the Crème de la Crème of Memorials but the Crème de la Crème of challenges to me too.

My first job was to go to Malta and assess the situation, where was it going to be situated, what sort of memorial would it be, how much would it cost, and who would progress it through to fruition? It seemed to all fall into place when a great Maltese pal of mine came to the rescue. So the birth of our memorial started to take shape. A visit to the Chancellor of St. Paul’s Cathedral, the R Canon Alan Woods resulted in, yes Dickie, “you can have that section of the south wall”. A visit to the stonemason recommended by and with my pal Charlie proved very encouraging, I came back from Malta full of hope and enthusiasm to complete the job.

July started to see the first of some 1,312 letters being sent out to all known Army, Royal Naval and Royal Marine Associations, the immediately response was to good to be true. Within three or four months our funds had rose to some £6,000, our main benefactors being the RNA’s, there was no need to appeal to our RAF friends, (RAFA) Today, the final amount in our fund is just und £7, 500.00p. This has not only enhanced the size of the original design but also improve it in quality and appearance.

Cely and I took our annual holiday very early this year, the beginning of January in fact, to enable me to put the final touches to our project and get the memorial read for the planed dedication date of 22nd. April and this proved most successful.

Armed with the chequebook in one hand and a pen in the other worked wonders, it only goes to prove that the Pen (plus cheque book) is mightier than the big stick or the sword; within three days the manufacture of the memorial was not only completed, but was also installed in place in the cathedral. What a wonderful sight and a great feeling of satisfaction.

Accompanying the memorial will be a Book of Remembrance, which will be kept in a locked small glass topped cabinet and can be viewed at any time by requesting the key from the Caretaker.

Our book opens with photographs and letters from Her Gracious Majesty the Queen, followed by HRH the Queen mother and the late King George VI, also HRH the Duke of Edinburgh (Our Royal Patron), the late Sir Winston Churchill with his speech to the merchant navy in the House of Commons in 1941. His Grace the Archbishop of Canterbury, H.E the President and Prime Mister of Malta, King of Norway, King of Belgium and the President of Poland.

We hope too for similar contributions of letters etc. from all Heads of States of countries that lost ships and Seafarers in the Malta Convoys. The book also acknowledges all people that have contributed to our fund and work in kind. A full list of all ships sunk or damaged together with men who crossed the bar to calmer waters, in that desperate bid to save Malta from starvation and surrender.

The dedication service has now been arranged with the Padre the Revd Alan, and invitations has been sent to both His Excellency The President and the Prime Minster of Malta. His Excellency The British High Commissioner and all Ambassadors of countries residing in Malta, that lost merchant ships and seafarers while supplying Malta with food and war supplies during WWII. The British High Commissioner H.E. Mr. Howard Pearce CVO of Malta will be reading the lesson on behalf of the MN, he is also providing the refreshments after the service.

I am pleased to say that a large contingency of all ex-service personnel will be making their way to St. Paul’s Cathedral in Valletta Malta G.C. for the dedication service, and it will be a great pleasure to greet them all there.

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