



remembrance ni

Larne man survived sinking of destroyer which was almost called HMS Larne



Larne man Tommy Shields, a survivor of HMS Gurka off Norway. And on duty in the Red Sea in 1939. Tommy died 18/07/2005

Larne man Tommy Shields joined the Royal Navy in 1936 when things were alright in the world and he was enjoying a sunny life with the Mediterranean fleet when war was declared in September 1939.



HMS Gurkha sinking after being torpedoed

However, war brought changed times. His ship, HMS Gurkha - an L class destroyer - was to be the first destroyer to be sunk by air attack in the war on 09/04/1940.

On the outbreak of war HMS Gurka was immediately recalled for Atlantic convoy duties. The ship's company returned to Rosyth and went straight out into the very cold North Atlantic still equipped with their kit that was designed for life in the Mediterranean, it was definitely not designed for Atlantic winters. The only extra comfort was very hairy woolly long underwear donated by a monastery.

HMS Gurkha was detached from the convoy duties and sent to aid the evacuation of Norway and participated in the very first moves of the Norwegian Campaign sailing with HMS Afridi and a force of cruisers and destroyers from Rosyth on 7/8th April 1940.



On the 09/04/1940 at 1400, the force was attacked by Ju88 and He111 bombers. One bomb hit Gurkha's aft end and blew a 40 foot hole in the starboard side and very soon the stern was awash and she had a 45 degree list to starboard. All the lights were out but the wounded were brought up and laid on the fo'c'sle. Many were blinded by fuel oil and everyone had to cling to the guard rails or anchor chains to keep from falling overboard. Some made it to the boats and Carley floats.

It was now getting dark and cold but Tommy and a few other gunners were still manning their guns as best they

could but eventually the Captain was obliged to abandon ship. Tommy, with a few others, survived and lying in the oil covered sea he had to watch his ship slide under the sea not more than fifty yards from him. Fortunately one of their sister ships, HMS Aurora returned to look for survivors and he was rescued; there were only 190 survivors.

Tommy was returned to UK and after a few days 'survivors leave' he was given the strange job of travelling backwards and forwards on the Torpoint ferry, the main link between Devon (Plymouth) and



Some of the survivors of HMS *Gurkha* arriving at the Dutch destroyer *Isaac Sweers*

Cornwall, though never having been told why he was there or the exact duty he was on Actionless and bored.

He and a friend volunteered to join the hazardous small boat crews who manned the motor launches and motor torpedo boats. He was lucky and left his backwards and forwards life and was assigned to ML1030 which returned him to the Mediterranean Fleet and eventually they were tasked to Crete.

Ironically *Gurkha* was originally to be called HMS *Larne* - an L class destroyer in line with her class letter. On 31 March 1938 an order was placed with Cammell Laird for *Larne*, one of eight L-class destroyers ordered that day and was laid down on 18 October 1938, the first of her class.

In April 1940, after the Tribal-class destroyer *Gurkha* was sunk off Norway, the officers and men of the Gurkha Regiments each subscribed one day's pay to replace her and in June it was decided to rename *Larne* as *Gurkha* to continue the relationship between the ship and the Gurkha Regiment. The ship was renamed before launching. She was launched on 8 July 1940 by Mary, daughter of Winston Churchill. Her only commanding officer, Commander C N Lentaigne, was brother of Joe Lentaigne who was an officer in the 4th (Prince of Wales Own) Gurkhas.

Tommy Shields died 18/07/2005. Following the sinking of HMS Gurka families of missing crew members received notification from the Admiralty and news of this was printed in the Belfast Weekly Telegraph which is an excellent contemporary record of the war's impact on the Northern Ireland community.

IRWIN, Arthur.

AB. HMS Gurka survivor. Edenderry St., Belfast. (Belfast Weekly Telegraph 20/04/1940).

PELAN. HM

HMS Gurka. Upper Canning St., Belfast. (Belfast Weekly Telegraph 20/04/1940).

SMITH, Hugh

AB. HMS Gurka. Fortingale St., Belfast. (Belfast Weekly Telegraph 20/04/1940).

Acknowledgments

Belfast Weekly Telegraph
BBC Your Place and Mine

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The **remembrance ni** programme is overseen by Very Rev Dr Houston McKelvey OBE, QVRM, TD who served as Chaplain to 102 and 105 Regiments Royal Artillery (TA), as Hon. Chaplain to RNR and as Chaplain to the RBL NI area and the Burma Star Association NI. Dr McKelvey is a Past President of Queen's University Services Club. He may be contacted at houston.mckelvey@btinternet.com

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