



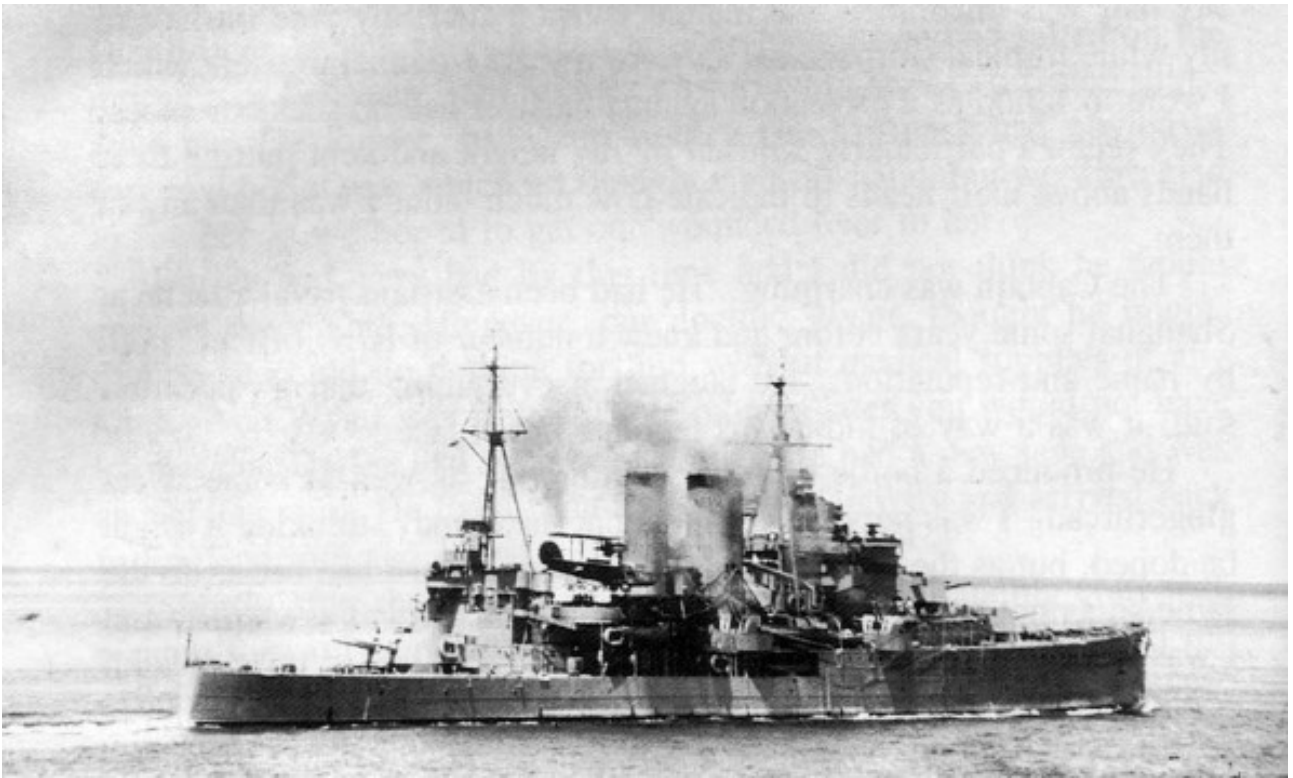
remembrance ni



**Castlerock
CPO who
survived two
ships sinking
and being a
Japanese
POW after
HMS Exeter**

Until he joined the merchant navy, George Thompson lived at the Barmouth, Castlerock, where the Rover Bann flows into the Atlantic.

As a youth in the early 1930's he helped his father to operate the row boat ferry from the



HMS Exeter fighting off an aircraft attack in January 1942 during the Battle of the Banka Straits.

Barmouth side of the Bann to the Portstewart side. Between the runs he helped his father fish round the dangerous waters of the Bann estuary. He said his father knew no fear.

One day when aged 16 George was in Coleraine. A steamship was loading in the harbour. He shouted to a sailor, "would you have a vacancy for a deck hand?" "What's your experience," was the answer. "I fish with my father around the mouth of the Bann," George replied.

George immediately went home for some clothes. His mother was so upset she couldn't come to the door of their cottage on the Bann side and wave to George as he sailed away later that day.

In the merchant navy he visited five countries prior to the war. He had seen a lot of sea before he was paid off in Liverpool to await joining another ship. It was there he joined the Royal Navy.

He recalled that everything in the Royal Navy was so much better. It was all so very disciplined. He arranged from the beginning that a portion of his pay would be directed to his mother weekly for her own use.

When the war started he was right in the middle of the action from the beginning. After a number of dangerous operations his ship, HMS Curlew, was bombed by the German airforce and sank in a Norwegian fjord. George was one of the survivors who returned to England.

It was not long before he was posted to HMS Exeter. The ship made famous from its role in what became known as the Battle of the River Plate, was sunk by Japanese bombers in the Battle of Java. George was picked up from the shark-infested waters to be interned in a Japanese prisoner of war camp for over three years.

For some months nothing was known about him until a Portrush amateur radio enthusiast heard a Japanese radio propaganda programme saying, "Mrs Thompson of the Barmouth need not worry about George because he is safe in their hands and was being treated as though he was in a hotel." Nevertheless, disregarding the lie about the hotel, the news conveyed hope to Mrs Thompson. George's father died of a broken heart because he didn't know what had happened to his son.



A captured Japanese aerial photograph of HMS Exeter sinking in the Second Battle of the Java Sea.

George in the POW camp may have wondered about his three brothers who were also at sea. It was just as well he did not learn until he came home that Jimmy, William and Johnny had perished in some way.

Reduced to skin and bone, George survived and served out his time in the navy before saying goodbye to the sea. He found a job in Coleraine and met his wife Elizabeth who was from Kilrea. They lived in Gortree Park in Castlerock and had a family of two boys and two girls.

Just when things were looking good for the future, Elizabeth was injured in a road accident. After quite a period of tender, loving, care, she died, whilst still a young woman. George raised his family as a single parent. Indeed, he felt he had three daughters when he brought into his family a little neice whose mother had died when quite young.

George was an active member of the Limavady Branch of the RNA. Each year he laid the wreath at Christ Church Parish Church Service of Remembrance in Castlerock.

It was in the parish church that the service was held prior to George's funeral on Monday 26th December, 2003. The seaman's hymn, "Eternal Father, strong to save..." was sung. Among the congregation was Seamus McLaughlin, a wartime submariner from Articlave near Castlerock. A grandson, serving in the Royal Navy, read the Naval Prayer and Royal Naval Association Standard Bearers led the cortege from the church to the nearby junction where the promenade rises and the great Atlantic Ocean, well-known to George, was visible. George's remains rest in Articlave churchyard.

George told a friend that whilst in the navy he had never missed Divine Service at sea if he could manage it and that he noticed "that when we had to bury someone at sea, everyone was reverent."

A daughter's tribute

Writing in Castlerock Parish Magazine, George's daughter, Melda Campbell, recalled -

"As the time draws near to the 11th of November, I think of my father, George Thompson. What would his thoughts and memories be on the 11th of November? How he would be polishing his medals with pride for the Church Remembrance Service.



HMS Exeter during the famous Battle of River Plate

“I am sure he would have many thoughts about the events that shaped his time at sea during the war. How he was taken captive on that fateful day when his ship HMS Exeter, was sunk by the Japanese and he became a prisoner of war. How he had survived from having malaria whilst he was held as a POW for four years. To have previously survived being sunk not once but twice he must have wondered if he would make it. And then to be freed and come home when the war ended.

“My father, like most POW's, didn't speak much of his terrible ordeal at the hands of his captors. He only did so

to reflect on his young comrades who were not fortunate enough to survive and come home to their families.

“Like so many others on 11th November I will remember those brave men and women, who fought courageously and suffered so much, some losing their lives and not returning. We are lucky, my father returned and had a long and happy life. We are blessed to have shared it with him.

“With the greatest respect and love for my father.”

HMS Exeter the final days

The recollections of a crew member

It was February 1941 when as a young stoker I joined '*HMS Exeter*' then famous for her role in the Battle of the River Plate. We did our working up trials near the Denmark Straits while keeping an eye open for the '*Bismark*'. After several weeks we were ordered to Greenock to pick up a convoy for the Middle East.

We sailed via the Cape of Good Hope and up the Indian Ocean to Aden in the Red Sea. We continued convoying on this route from Durban to Aden for some months. We then moved farther east, Colombo, Bombay, Calcutta. On December 7th 1941, the day the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbour, we were off the coast of Burma with a convoy of troops heading for Rangoon. We were then ordered to make for Singapore to join '*HMS Prince of Wales*' and '*HMS Repulse*'. We arrived in Singapore on December 10th to find that they had both been sunk that day. We saw the survivors come in that night and we fed

and clothed them in a warehouse near where we were berthed. They also had their tot of rum.

We then continued on convoy duty bringing troops into Singapore. They were coming out from the UK and we picked them up at Batavia in Java. Singapore fell on February 15th 1942 after we had poured thousands of troops in there.

On February 27th we joined forces with 4 other cruisers, they were the American cruiser '*USS Houston*', the Australian cruiser '*HMS Perth*', two Dutch cruisers '*De Reuter*' and '*Java*' and about 6 destroyers. The Dutch admiral on board '*De Reuter*' was in command of the force.

We were in the Java Sea searching for a Japanese invasion force said to be steaming south between Borneo and Celebes. It was about 4.15pm and I had just picked up the first dog watch down the for'ard engine room when our 8 inch guns opened fire. We had been in action for some time when the ship seemed to shudder, we had been hit in the boiler room killing 14 men. We fell out of line but the action carried on and later that night the 2 Dutch cruisers were sunk and also the American and Australian cruisers. This action became known as the Battle of the Java Sea. We buried our dead in Surabaya in Java with full naval honours and sailed on Saturday night February 28th 1942.

On Sunday March 1st, St David's Day, we were at sea steaming on one boiler room. We were escorted by 2 destroyers, '*HMS Encounter*' and '*USS Pope*'. We had been ordered to make for Sunda Strait which is between Sumatra and Java. This would bring us into the Indian Ocean and freedom if we could avoid the Japanese fleet.

At 8 o'clock that morning I was back down in the engine room for the forenoon watch. It was 9.30 when our guns opened fire, the action had started again. At about 11.00am there was a terrific explosion, the lights dimmed and then went out, the secondary lighting came on but this only gave a very dim light. The engine slowed and the dynamo ran down. We were completely without power, so the guns were unable to fire. We had been hit in 'A' boiler room.

Efforts were made to bring the ship back into the action but to no avail. We were now a sitting target for the Japanese. There were several more explosions and eventually the order was given to abandon ship. I went up on deck and 'Exeter' was beginning to list to starboard. I jumped over the side and while we were in the water we watched her list further to starboard and sink to the bottom of the Java Sea. Our 2 escorts were also sunk.

Several hours later we were picked up by a Japanese destroyer and taken to the island of Celebes where we were incarcerated in a prison camp for 3½ years from which many never returned.

We were released in September 1945 and took passage on a submarine depot ship 'HMS Maidstone'. I arrived home by way of Australia and South Africa in December 1945, just in time for Christmas and exactly 5 years since I was last home on leave.

The HMS Exeter Window in Exeter Cathedral which was rededicated in 2008

A window of '*Christ walking on the water*', in memory of the officers and men of HMS Exeter who were lost in the Battle

of the Java Sea was dedicated in St Andrew's Chapel, Exeter Cathedral at noon on the 1st March 1948. The window was designed by Sir Ninian Comper and cost £410.



On the 1st March 2008, there was a reunion of surviving crew and relatives in the Guildhall, on the 66th anniversary of the sinking of HMS Exeter, and 60th anniversary of the dedication of the window, attended by the Lord Mayor, Councillor Hazel Slack, and eight surviving members of the crew. There was a service in St Andrews Chapel with the laying of a wreath at the window and a lone bugle sounding the *Last Post*.

Roll of Honour

Northern Ireland men in HMS Exeter

Battle of Java Sea

BELL, Stanley Hugh

RN. AB. Age 18. Two years service. HMS Exeter. Reported as missing. Son of Mrs Violet Bell, Majestic St., Belfast. (Belfast

Weekly Telegraph 20/03/1942). Boy. HMS Exeter. Japanese prisoner of war Son of Mrs Violet Bell, Majestic St., Belfast. (Belfast Weekly Telegraph 11/06/1942)

CATHERWOOD, Thomas George

RN. AB. Reported missing from HMS Exeter. Three years service. His father served for eight years in the 8th King's Irish Hussars and was awarded the MM in WW1. Eldest son of Mr H Catherwood, Roden St., Belfast. (Belfast Weekly Telegraph 27/03/1942).

CHEYNE, Richard Warren

RM. Corporal. Reported missing from HMS Exeter. 5 years service. Member of First Bangor Presbyterian Church and 2nd Bangor Scout Group. His father Constable Hugh Cheyne RUC, was killed in a traffic accident 12 years previously. His mother resided at 69 Belfast Rd., Bangor. (Belfast Weekly Telegraph 27/03/1942).

DEVLIN, George

RN. Signalman. Reported missing from HMS Exeter. 18 years old. 3 years service. He was goal keeper for Linfield Senior Public Elementary School when they won medals and cup in 1936 and 1937. A brother was serving with the Royal Norfolk Regiment, and two uncles and two aunts were serving in the army. A cousin was disabled at Dunkirk. Son of Mrs A. Devlin, Utility St., Belfast. (Belfast Weekly Telegraph 27/03/1942).

EVANS, WK

RM. Marine. Reported missing from HMS Exeter. Six year's service. Sister serving in the WAAF. Mother and two sisters

residing at Meekon St., off Severn St., Belfast. (Belfast Weekly Telegraph 20/03/1942).

FORBES, A S

RN. Boy First Class. HMS Exeter. Japanese Prisoner of War after the Battle of Java. Son of Mr and Mrs A. Forbes, Cregagh St., Belfast

LOYAL, Joseph H

RN. Petty Officer. Reported missing from HMS Exeter. 34 years old. 18 years service. His wife and two small sons lived at Rosyth, Scotland. Son of Mrs Mary and the late Mr Joseph Loyal, Glenbank Place, Ballysillan, Belfast. (Belfast Weekly Telegraph 27/03/1942).

McPHILLIPS, Jack

RN. Stoker. CGM award in recognition of his feat in attacking a sentry whilst he was a Japanese PoW in Sumatra. He thus enabled the escape of six internees. He was taken prisoner following the sinking of HMS Exeter in the Battle of the Java Sea. When he was posted back to the service he was seriously wounded at Algiers and was discharged. In the course of his service he had been wounded five times and took part in no fewer than seven evacuations - Norway, Dunkirk, Greece, Crete, Singapore, Sumatra and Java. A brother Patrick was serving in the RAF. Married with one child he resided at Forest St., Springfield Ave., Belfast. His mother resided in Scotch St., (Belfast Weekly Telegraph 22/12/1944).

MORTON, Frederick

RN. Boy. Reported missing from HMS Exeter. Two years service, one at sea. Son of Fred Morton, a well known soccer player with Linfield and Blackburn Rovers. His parents resided at Kenyan St., Belfast. (Belfast Weekly Telegraph 27/03/1942).

NICHOLL, Hugh

RN. Boy. Reported missing Far East. Later confirmed as a Japanese prisoner of war following the sinking of HMS Exeter in the Battle of Java. Son of Mrs Mary Nicholl, Cuan Place, Belfast (Belfast Weekly Telegraph 20/03/1942, 06/08/1943).

PORTER, Ernest

RN. AB. Serving in HMS Exeter. His wife, Mrs Annabel Porter lived at Aberdeen St., Belfast. "On Wednesday last Mrs Porter received a letter from her husband in which he stated that he was well and happy. On Thursday she got a second letter, written on Christmas Day, in which he recalled the Shankill Rd on a Christmas Night, and expressed his longing to see it again. On Friday she got a telegram from the Admiralty informing her that her husband was missing following the Battle of Java". He formerly worked in the Queen's Island engine works. (Belfast Weekly Telegraph 27/03/1942).

PURDY, Bertie

RN. Seaman. HMS Exeter. Confirmed as Japanese prisoner of war. Son of Mrs Purdy, Old Town, Annalong. (Belfast Weekly Telegraph 28/05/1943).

SAVAGE, James Ogle

RN. Seaman. Reported missing from HMS Exeter. Age 18. 2 years service. Former pupil of Newry Intermediate School. Son of Mr and Mrs J Savage, Cloughmor Terrace, Warrenpoint. (Belfast Weekly Telegraph 27/03/1942).

THOMPSON, George

RN. CPO Stoker. Reported missing from HMS Exeter. Age 23. Three years service. He served in HMS Curlew which was sunk at Narvik in May, 1940. He formerly served in the Merchant Navy. A brother was serving in the RN and another in the MN. Son of Mr and Mrs George Thompson, Barmouth, Castlerock. (Belfast Weekly Telegraph 27/03/1942). Japanese PoW. Limavady RNA

Acknowledgments

Belfast Weekly Telegraph

Castlerock, Dunboe and Fermoye Parish Magazine

Tribute to George Thompson by James Gardiner

John Pudney, RNA Limavady Branch

remembrance ni

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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