



remembrance ni



## **Ulster sailors killed at Anzio in Belfast - built HMS Penelope**

On February 18, 1944 three Able Seamen and a Petty Officer from Northern Ireland died in HMS Penelope which was torpedoed near Anzio. They were Thomas Gould from Belfast, Kenneth Hewitt from Londonderry, William Hunter from Ballyclare and Samuel Taylor from Dundrod. 418 members of the ship's company of 650 were lost, including the captain DG Belben. A Lance Bombardier from Londonderry in the Royal Artillery was killed at Anzio the previous day.

## **The Belfast-built ship had been attacked so often she was nicknamed HMS Pepperpot.**

One of the survivors, Jack Clark, a Royal marine musician, was a gunnery operator in the transmitting station on Penelope. He recalled his experience to the BBC.

“Having taken part in actions in the North Africa campaign, Sicily, Italy and Aegean we were engaged in the bombardment of enemy positions relating to the beachhead at Anzio. Having bombarded for approximately two weeks we were becoming short of fuel and ammunition. On the 17th February 1944 we left during the late evening and returned to Naples to replenish supplies of the aforementioned. Captain Belben had completed our tour of duty and was expected to give us a well-earned 24-hour rest period, the custom when conditions permitted.

“As we anchored in the bay of Naples at 22:00 captain Belben received a signal ordering him to prepare for sea immediately and return to Anzio to take the place of HMS Dido, which had been in collision with a landing craft in Naples bay. The position at Anzio was so critical not one cruiser could be spared, as every gun was needed to drive back the enemy who was driving our land forces dangerously towards the sea. In fact Mr Winston Churchill our leader and prime minister stated, 'A deep dangerous wedge was driving into our line and no further retreat was possible, it was life or death.' “Crewmen in the duty port watch toiled late into the night to oil and ammunition under the hazard of air alerts. At 06:00 on 18th February, a Friday,

we left Naples bay and increased speed to 26 knots and then steered a NW course to make for Anzio, zigzagging as she went to avoid possible submarine attacks. Early that morning U410 commanded by Lieutenant Arno Fensky, aged 25, had moved into the area. He had already destroyed a 7,000-ton supply ship on the 15th February.



“At 06:53 the U410 look-out cried out 'enemy ship', the captain of U410 ordered diving stations to periscope level and closed in fast on HMS Penelope. At 06:58 a torpedo leapt from its tube to run at a depth of 6 meters towards an unsuspecting Penelope, it took just 35 seconds to reach the cruiser. Then there was a thunderous explosion, which sent men crashing to the deck, as the stern lifted out of the water. “The hit was well below the water line on the starboard side abaft the engine room. It fractured oil tanks and caused flooding to the aft engine room and other compartments. An emergency signal was immediately started, but before the full text was tapped out the power failed. Penelope listed to starboard as the sea rushed through the torn hull, then she began circling to starboard, her steering gear damaged, in

effect no lights, aft engine room out of action, no steering, no telephones and 9 degree list to starboard.

“The captain ordered counter flooding, then ordered a signalman to signal to LST 165 and 430 a few miles distant to 'close me', they were returning to Naples empty to pick up more troops, by then Penelope had stopped with smoke belching from her after funnel. At that point Fensky ordered 'Fire 2' tube No 1 with a Mark V torpedo. To give the cruiser the coup de grace then came the second shattering explosion which hit starboard side abreast the boiler room followed by a second thud which caused the after magazine to blow up. Penelope capsized with a column of water that shot into the air, smoke belching from the after funnel and the boiler room exploded and flooded. Penelope had broken her back, two ends pointed upwards, the bow at an angle of 50 degrees.

“My action station had just been fallen out and I instinctively made my way into the open portside waist, and no sooner reached the open as the explosion occurred. I immediately dived over the side into the icy, rough, oil-covered sea wearing a roll neck pullover, jacket and sea boots. Other men still in duffel coats sank straight to the bottom. The ship had vanished in one and a half minutes with a large number of men trapped inside, no boats or rafts as they went with the ship. Many men died in the water from lack of strength and oil ingestion. After approx one and three-quarters hours a tank landing craft reached us, but alas had no means of picking us up.

“Our heroic chaplain Rev PA Murphy had shortly gone into the sick bay stating, in reply to a question, 'I'm going where I'm needed.' Unfortunately he was not seen again.

“Some army ratings hung rope over the side of the LST and those of us that had the strength grabbed the rope and were pulled onto the deck of the LST. As this was difficult being soaked in oil, many men slipped back into the sea and were not seen again. My strength was quickly ebbing but I managed to hang onto the rope and as I neared the top two men of the Queen's Own Regiment grabbed my shoulders and pulled me on board where I flopped like an oily whale. We were taken back to Naples and put aboard a hospital ship Winchester Castle for a few days to recover”.

Penelope was built by Harland & Wolff in Belfast. In September 1943 she was part of Force Q, the allied landings at Salerno, Italy, during which she augmented the bombardment force.

On 7 October, with the cruiser Sirius and other ships, she sank six enemy landing craft, one ammunition ship and an armed trawler off Stampalia. While the ships were retiring through the Scarpanto Straits south of Rhodes, they were attacked by 18 Ju 87 "Stuka" dive- bombers of I Gruppe Stukageschwader 3 MEGARA. Although damaged by a bomb, Penelope was able to return to Alexandria at 22 kn (25 mph; 41 km/h).

A memorial plaque commemorating those lost is in St Ann's Church, HM Dockyard, Portsmouth.

# On this Day – February 18

## 1915

**William Brooke Purdon RAMC** was awarded a Military Cross. He rose to Major General. President of the QUB Services Club in 1948. Born in Belfast 28/11/1881. Educated at RBAI, MCB and Queen's College graduating in medicine in 1906

## 1918

**Archibald Fullerton, RAMC**, Major, was awarded a Bar to his Military Cross. He was later to receive a further Bar. He was a QUB graduate. Son of Elizabeth Fullerton, Gortinegin, Gortgranagh, Co Tyrone.

## 1938

Japanese began a 6-month-long aerial bombardment campaign against Chongqing.

## 1940

145 Officers and Men of HMS Daring including one from NI (See RH below) died on this day

Chinese forces drive Japanese out of Nanning, China.

## 1941

Parts of the Australian 8th Division arrive in Singapore.

## **1942**

German vessel disguised as a British merchantman is reported sunk by a U-boat off Azores.

First Seabees arrive in the Pacific, on Bora Bora in American Samoa to build an airfield.

In Singapore, Japanese send 3,000 British civilians to Changi prison and 50,000 British, Australian, and Indian POWs to Selarang Barracks.

Japanese invade Bali, despite allied naval interception and bomb Darwin on Northern Australia.

## **1943**

In the wake of the Stalingrad disaster, Dr. Goebbels, speaking before an enthusiastic audience of soldiers and civilians in Berlin, announces the implementation of “total war” which, for the first time, mandates the employment of German women in the war effort. The speech was the first public admission by the Nazi leadership that Germany faced serious dangers.

The first class of 39 flight nurses graduates at Bowman Field, Kentucky.

A B-29 Superfortress bomber crashes in test flight into a meat-packing plant in Seattle, 33 killed

Nazis arrest the ringleaders of the White Rose resistance group at the University of Munich.



German General Erwin Rommel takes three towns in Tunisia, North Africa.

Madame Chiang Kai-shek addresses joint session of Congress, the first woman and the first Chinese to do so

Franciscan Fr. Maximilian Kolbe (right) was arrested by Germans in Niepokalanów. He was first sent to Pawiak prison in Warsaw and then to Auschwitz, where he finally sacrificed his life - volunteered to replace another prisoner sentenced to starvation death.

Off Ireland, U-101 sinks British freighter Gairsoppa (85 killed) carrying 2800 bars of silver to fund war (110 tons of silver were recovered in 2011).

## 1944

**38 (Irish) Brigade** at Capua: "Division Commander's address at Caserta cinema for officers & senior NCOs. Concerning future operations, 78 Division is now in 2 NZ Corps/5 Army reserve. Attacks by 4 Ind Div/2 NZ Div to capture Cassino & establish a bridgehead across the Rapido."

Renewed allied attacks at Cassino are broken off.

Operation Jericho, a low-level bombing raid by Allied aircraft on Amiens Prison in German-occupied France. Mosquitoes, escorted by Typhoon fighter-bombers, launch a daylight low-level attack on the prison at Amiens, France, breaching walls in order release French patriots; 258 prisoners



escaped (including many criminals), but 102 inmates were killed.

The Germans make further gains at Anzio but are repulsed by allied artillery and warships.

The Red Army recaptures Staraya Russa, as Army Group North falls back to the line Narva-Pleskau-Oposhka.

The Germans conduct their heaviest night raid on London since 1941 as the Luftwaffe intensifies the 'Little Blitz'.

The Cruiser Penelope is sunk by U-410 off Naples and earns the distinction of being the last British cruiser to be lost in the war.

U.S. Marines begin landing on Eniwetok Atoll in the Marshall Islands.

## **1945**

The Red Army encircles Graudenz on the Vistula. Troops of the 11th SS Army are brought to a stand still by stiffening Soviet resistance to 'Operation Sonnenwende'.

A Russian torpedo hits the ex-'Strength through Joy' Nazi cruise liner leaving Danzig for Denmark with 5,000 refugees and 3,800 U-boat personnel on board. Only 1,000 are reported as saved.

British Empire casualties to November 1944 are announced as 282,162 killed, 80,580 missing, 386,374 wounded and 294,438 captured.

US Army Air Forces Band (under Maj. Glenn Miller before his death) performs at Paris Opera House, the first time popular music was performed at this venue.

# Roll of Honour – February 18

*Representing their comrades who died on this day*

**1916**

**+TOTTON, Herbert Edward**

Black Watch (Royal Highlanders). 1st/6th Btn. Lance Corporal. 2117. Died 18/02/1916. Age 27. Son of Jackson Totton, of Clara Park, Knock, Co. Down. Chipilly Communal Cemetery, France. Knock RFC Memorial Pavilion

**1917**

**+CAMPBELL, John**

Royal Irish Rifles. 12th Btn. Rifleman. 104. Died 18/02/1917. Born in Ballynure. Enlisted in Ballyclare. St Quentin Cabaret Military Cemetery, Belgium. Ballyclare WM

**+JOHNSTON, Joseph Allen**

Royal Irish Fusiliers, 9th Btn. Captain Died 18/02/1917. Age 25. "The Lisburn Standard reported on 23/02/1917 - Captain J. A. Johnston killed in action - Captain Joseph Allen Johnston, Royal Irish Fusiliers (Armagh Volunteers) was killed on Sunday morning last by a sniper's bullet, which pierced his heart, death being instantaneous. Deceased, who was only 25 years of age, was the fourth son of the late Mr. James Johnston, J.P., Lurgan, and cousin of Mr. Thomas Johnston, chemist, Market Sq., Lisburn. Two brothers are serving with the colours". Son of James Johnston, J.P., and Christina Johnston, of 43, High St.,

Lurgan. St Quentin Cabaret Military Cemetery, Heuvelland, West-Vlaanderen, Belgium

**+JOHNSTON, Thomas**

Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, 12th Btn. Private. 22803. Died 18/02/1917. Age 35, Son of Thomas and Agnes Johnston, of 3, Crosby St., Belfast. Shankill Graveyard, Belfast

**1919**

**+McCALLUM, A**

2nd Life Guards and Guards Machine Gun Regiment. Trooper. 4670. Died 18/02/1919. Age 35. Husband to Ethel McCallum, of 8, Forth Glen, Ballygomartin Rd., Belfast. Belfast City Cemetery

**1920**

**+McILROY, Samuel**

Cameronians (Scottish Rifles), 9th Btn. Acting Sergeant. 17614 & 63215. Died of pulmonary tuberculosis on 18/02/1920. Aged 25. He is not recorded as a war fatality by the CWGC. He had been discharged from the army on the 22/09/1919. Born 10/07/1894 at Fenagh, Craigs, Cullybackey. Son of Henry McIlroy and Jane Neilly (also Neely). In 1911, Samuel McIlroy appears to have been a farm servant working for the Simpson family, Ballyloughan, Ballymena. His brother, 23187 Private Henry (Harry) McIlroy, 11th Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, was killed in 1917. High Kirk (2nd Ballymena) Presbyterian Church, RH

**1940**

**+ENGLISH, William**

RN. Cook (S). C/MX 52431. Died 18/02/1940. Age 22. HMS Daring. Son of Thomas and Mrs. English, Jellicoe Ave., Belfast. Reported as missing in Belfast Weekly Telegraph 02/03/1940. Chatham Naval Memorial. Panel 39.

**1943**

**+BLOOMER, William Frederick**

Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, 1st BTN. Fusilier. 6979121. Died 18/02/1943. Age 32. He was the son of William Bloomer and Henrietta Bloomer (née Smyth) of Belfast. The 1911 Irish census lists Bloomer as a newborn living with an older brother James Bloomer and their parents. Their home is with Mary Jane Smyth, their 67 year old grandmother at 19 Dorchester Street, Belfast. William's father died on 15/08/1915 at the Dardanelles while serving with the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers in WW1. His brother James died as a young boy in 1916. In 1938, William enlisted in the Royal Irish Fusiliers and spent around 12 months training in England. He then left for India. His mother received notification of his death in Burmah (Myanmar) at her home at 228 Matilda Street, Belfast, Co. Antrim in March 1943. Rangoon Memorial, Taukkyan War Cemetery, Burma. Family memorial Glenalina Extension, Belfast City Cemetery

**+LUNEY, John**

Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers. 1st Btn. Fusilier. 7043657. Died 18/02/1943. Age 28. Son of David and Sarah Luney, of Ballysillan, Belfast. Rangoon Memorial, Myanmar

**1944**

**HMS PENELOPE**

**+GOULD, Thomas**

RN. AB. P/JX 283876. Died 18/02/1944. HMS Penelope. Three brothers serving, one in RN. Son of David Gould, Belgrave St., Belfast. (Belfast Weekly Telegraph 17/03/1944). Portsmouth Naval Memorial, Panel 82

**+HEWITT, Kenneth**

RN. Petty Officer. Six years' service. P/KX 93267. Died 18/02/1944. Age 24. HMS Penelope. Son of Harold and Esther Hewitt Fountain St., Londonderry; husband of Kathleen Hewitt, Londonderry. (Belfast Weekly Telegraph 17/03/1944). Portsmouth Naval Memorial, Panel 85

**+HUNTER, William John**

RN. Able Seaman. P/SSX 21424. Enlisted 1937. Date of Death:18/02/1944. Age: 23. HMS Penelope. Brother Robert served with Airborne Forces. Born Logwood Rd., Ballyclare. Son of John and Lavinia Mary Hunter, Ballyclare. Portsmouth Naval Memorial, Panel 82

**+McAVOY, Joseph**

RN. Stoker. D/KX 564930. Died 18/02/1944. Age 19. HMS Penelope. Son of Edward & Martha McAvoy 3 Bangor Street. Belfast. Portsmouth Naval Memorial, Canton Street Mission Hall

**+TAYLOR, Samuel Johnston**

RN. Able Seaman. P/JX 198151. Died 18/02/1944. Age 27. HMS Penelope. Son of Thomas and Mary Taylor, The Kennels, Dundrod, Templepatrick. (Belfast Weekly Telegraph 24/03/1944). Portsmouth Naval Memorial, Glenavy WM. Lisburn WM

**1944**

**+IRVINE, Joseph**

Irish Guards. 1st Btn. Guardsman. 2719239. Died 18/02/1944. From Tempo. Anzio War Cemetery, Italy

**1946**

**+ROSS, James**

(2754866) served in the Pioneer Corps. Private. 2754866. Died 18/02/1946. Age 26. Husband to Esther Ross of Belfast. Carnmoney Cemetery.

**Every day is a Remembrance  
Day**

***We will remember them***

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**Information about individuals who served - please forward to remembrance ni at email below**

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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 [houstonmckelvey@mac.com](mailto:houstonmckelvey@mac.com)

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