

# HMS OPOSSUM ASSOCIATION



**SPRING NEWSLETTER 2018**

**1945-1958**

Welcome to our Spring Newsletter. Since no stories from members have been received apart from Chairman's Comments all the following is my efforts and is hoped will be of interest to the membership. Member Gary Holmes has asked if any of the 1954 commission remembers the first name of A/B Smith, the athlete, he's tried to trace him through the internet.

This years reunion is over the weekend 1st – 3rd June 2018 at Tillington Hall Hotel, Staffordshire ST16 1JJ Tel;- 01785-253531 See you all there. To maintain confidentiality this year the membership list will be sent separately by [snail mail] to those who received the Newsletter by email,

Yours Aye Eddie.

## **Chairman's Comments**

During recent weeks there have been much preparation by us as well as family and friends this cumulated on Saturday evening 10th February when Vera and I celebrated our 70th wedding anniversary [14th February 1948] with 76 guests attending. Should you look on web sites [blindveterans.org.uk](http://blindveterans.org.uk) or the Sunday Express, 11th February, to see text and photographs of our big day. Hope to see you all at our reunion in June.

Chairman Lewis Trinder Legion de Honneur

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# Treasurer's Report

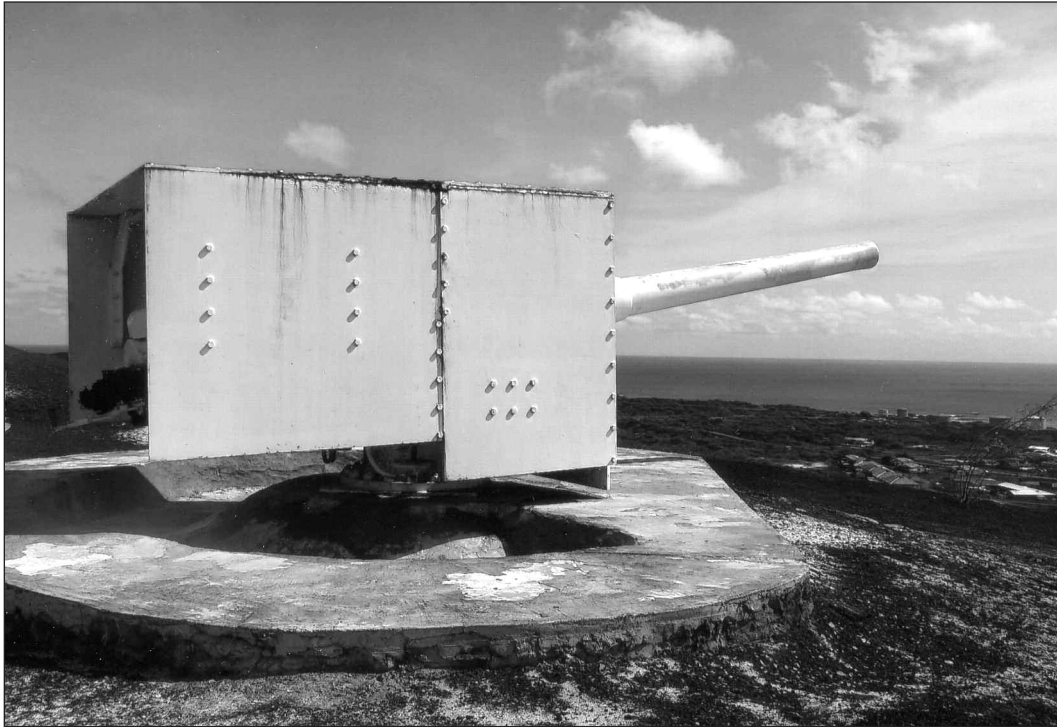
Balance of funds £2,189.99

## Roll of Honour

|                      |                    |                   |
|----------------------|--------------------|-------------------|
| Ronald Bradley       | John Eardly Wilmot | John Cartwright   |
| J W Powell           | Albert Corless     | Harry Barlow      |
| David Jarvis         | Bob Gray           | Les Wood          |
| George Scott         | John Williams      | Ken Harris        |
| Pat Norman           | Reg Parker         | Harry Roach       |
| Ivan C Haskell       | George Fletcher    | Fred Thornton     |
| George Richards      | Fred[Mick]Bodel    | Fred King         |
| George Curry         | Sid Pemberton      | John Davison      |
| Cliff Harthill       | George Brown       | Steven Hart       |
| Stewart A Porter     | Arthur Pope        | Jack Marshall     |
| Les Dimmock          | John Bray          | Joe Gornall       |
| Doug Banks           | Dick[Ginger]Bird   | Jackie Scholes    |
| Harry Wollams        | Cornelious Canon   | Jim Tribe         |
| Doug Goulding        | John Fraser        | Pete Maddox       |
| Bill Bolton          | Cyril Mason        | John Hardman      |
| Ken Philips          | Mike Swayne        | Harry Catterson   |
| Ron Hare             | Bill Bovey         | Jack Richards     |
| William Wilder       | George[Jan]Lobb    | Bill Price        |
| Martin George        | Ken Slater         | Mike Cole         |
| Jim Payne            | Peter Lockwood     | Ted Longstaff     |
| Roy Cope             | Ron Blundy         | Bert Rimmer       |
| John Blair           | John W C Clark     | Ken Carson        |
| Charles Parker       | Tony Harris        | Willy Mitchell    |
| Brian Healey         | Alan Percival      | Roy Wood          |
| Alister Hunter Blair | Stan Oldfield      | John Jones        |
| John MacKenzie       | Tom Tolson         | Ian Janes         |
| John Owen            | Ken Hodgkin        | Walter[Brum]Lewis |

# ATLANTIC ODYSSEY [Part Two]

by Eddie Summerfold



Ascension Isle – an ex-HMS Hood obsolete coastal defence gun

The ship MV Plancius is off Tristan Da Cunha's archipelago of Nightingale Island our intrepid passengers land by Zodiac boat with it's outboard engine. There's no beach just a very rocky outcrop giving an uneven surface. Apart from the wild life our party are the only human inhabitants. There's steep overhanging cliffs the party have gone on ahead. Just about to attempt the climb at that moment gout suddenly returns to my right foot! All I can do is limp and not very well at that on the uneven rocks. With the Zodiac returned to the ship, I'm sort of marooned until the party returns or the boat. So for the next hour or so sat taking numerous photographs of fur seals, sea birds and general views. Once back on board Plancius the ship heads off to our net destination Inaccessible isle, another in the archipelago of Tristan. A landing is impractical, a reason I'd joined one of the Zodiacs with my gout foot! Unbeknown I'd picked the wrong boat within minutes the engine stopped and we wallowed about until help arrived. There are no seats in Zodiacs, passengers just sit on the rim and we waited. Another Zodiac full of passengers came alongside when their cox'n climbed aboard and diagnosed a blocked fuel pipe. Since there was no towing rope he would return to the ship for a new fuel pipe. And so we just sat waiting. What little sun there was had gone behind the clouds and it became chilly. Eventually what

seemed like ages a Zodiac returned empty and unceremoniously we clambered aboard and a tow rope was about to be attached, it wasn't required our old Zodiac's engine suddenly burst into life. Gremlins, gremlins! Once up the gangway of Plancius hot steaming mugs of cocoa are handed round a very welcome gesture. The ship is now bound for St. Helena 4-5 days sailing away. That afternoon we site a school of whales some passengers obtain good quality photographs mostly taken from the raised band stand right in the bows. Alas mine are feeble attempts, mostly empty patches of sea! Get back into the ships routine, regular meal times, afternoon and evening nature lectures by the knowledgeable tour party, different people to talk with such as John, a Shetland Islander listen while at the bar to his many fishing stories. Yet the ship returns to it's rolling motion and soon after dinner most seem to turn-in early. On this journey three problems emerge. Daily the temperature improves Antarctic clothing is put aside with shorts and tee-shirts emerging, except I'd prepared for colder climes but not warmer, so I to make do. For many months I've been on a tablet regime of Eloquis, {blood thinning} two a day morning and evening. Realizing I'm running short approach the ships medical facilities with young newly qualified female doctor, built like an amazon, of the no nonsense type, "You'll have to have injections instead, I'll demonstrate what to do, then you can take over!!!! I've seen young children self-inject, there's nothing to it. One other thing you'll be charged for this." So for five days, morning and evening, after which my thighs looked like pin cushions!!! The third blow came via a note under the cabin door. All flights to and from Ascension Island have been stopped, it' our next island after St, Helena. I had booked a return flight from Ascension to the UK! Several other passengers are in a similar position. With some help from the tour staff make arrangements for flights from Cape Verde the island after Ascension. Meaning as well as further costs of flights need to pay the ship for a further 6 days passage and board. Poor reception and expensive ship phone calls to Barclays travel insurance to make a claim. Once anchored off Jamestown the capital of St. Helena get ashore to the local hospital and for £56 get a supply of Eloquis tablets, one problem solved. This island noted for imprisoning Napoleon Bonaparte and later 5,000 Boer prisoners from South Africa is roughly 10 miles by five, situated about 2,500 miles East of Rio de Janeiro and some 1,200 miles West of Namibia/Angola border. To boost tourism and as an alternative to Ascension island an airport has been built, sadly in the wrong place to cope with adverse winds and though opened two years ago only one medium size commercial aircraft has made a landing and that on the third attempt, since then only a hand full of small planes have made landings, a big disappointment to the local economy.

Jamestown lies in a steep narrow valley with a single main street of Georgian buildings. A tourist attraction is Jacobs Ladder, an ascent of 600ft. up 699 steps, at an angle of 44 degrees to reach Ladder Hill with a mock up of a ship's mast and two old coastal BL guns, that can only be viewed from the road way. Excursions are laid on to visit the empty tomb of Napoleon [the body shipped by the French to Les Invalides Paris in 1840, he had died here in May 1821] and to see his last residence Longwood House with lots of original artifacts. The French tricolor flies from a mast for this area is designated French soil.

The ship has now acquired several more passengers including a family with two small children. Soon we are at sea to cover the 800 miles [two days] to reach Ascension Isle. Upon arrival we find a difficult landing at the pier to get ashore from the Zodiacs with a heavy rise and fall from the breakers. What's to be seen on isolated volcanic Ascension? Lots of bird life, sooty terns have a large colony, female turtles laying eggs at night on the beaches, an American airport that's shut to all traffic, a mass of communication equipment of many radio antenna and dishes for GPS, rocket tracking facilities, BBC world service relay station and on Cross Hill are two First World War naval guns. These are single 5.5 inch Coventry Ordnance Works pieces, the same mark of gun that equipped HMS Chester [See Christmas Newsletter article 'Standing Alone'] positioned above the capital Georgetown with a commanding view, arrived in 1941 as coastal artillery defence, originally mounted on the battle cruiser HMS Hood removed during her last refit in 1938. The next day on the way up to Green Mountain look down onto a small secluded bay with the family from the ship leisurely swimming among small shoals of fish. A short time later the mother had her foot mangled by an attacking shark. Taken to the local hospital she was eventually sent for surgery by air ambulance to Paddington hospital in London. Meanwhile MV Plancius maintains it's schedule and sets sail for Cape Verde islands. Those of us with changes of itinerary have to pay an excess 450 Euros and a further 25 for landing visas. Eventually we disembark at the capital Praia. To while away the time before our midnight flights to Lisbon we take a tour of the place that's been a Portuguese possession since 1515. In seven weeks so ends my Odyssey, of visiting six widely scattered South Atlantic islands.

## NAVAL PERSONALITIES [18]

Admiral John Benbow [1653c – 1702]



Admiral Benbow

Most come across this sailor from the opening chapter of 'Treasure Island' [1883] by Robert Louis Stevenson from the pub he named Admiral Benbow where the hero Jim Hawkins meets Captain Billy Bones who has Flints treasure map. While at 25 Benbow was late in joining the Royal Navy he soon made up for lost time receiving rapid promotion being a daring fighter against the French at the battles of Beachy Head, Barfleur and La Hogue and during attacks on Barbury pirates off North Africa. As C-in-C West Indies in HMS Breda he was given command of a six ship squadron to attack the French off Catagena. A fighting admiral whose ruthless methods and indomitable courage against overwhelming odds he expected the same determination from his captains, alas they thought differently. In August 1702 he received a fatal leg wound from a chain shot but still court marshaled his cowardly captains once back in Port Royal lived to see the trial but not the outcome. Died from his wounds 4th November 1702. Brave Benbow.

## SHIPMATES HUMOUR

A big Texan is in a Mexican restaurant sipping his Tequila noting a sizzling, scrumptious meal being served at the next table, calls over a waiter and asks what it is. "Ah Senor you have excellent taste it is a rare delicacy called Conjones de Toro, bulls testicles from this mornings bull fight." The cowboy said, "What the heck bring me an order." "So sorry Senor there is only one serving per day as there is only one bull fight each morning. But if you come early tomorrow we are sure to serve you this fine delicacy." Early the next day the Texan placed his order to be served that evening. But after a few bites of the delicious meal he inspected his plate and called the waiter. "They are much smaller than the ones served yesterday." The waiter shrugged his shoulders. "Si Senor – sometimes the bull wins."

Bert thinks his wife Peg's hearing is defected and she might need a hearing aid. But how to approach the problem so asks his doctor for advice. Here's what to do, stand about 40ft away, speak in a normal voice and see if she hears. If not try at 30ft. and 20ft. until she responds. That evening with Peg in the kitchen cooking dinner and he about 40ft. away. "Honey what's for dinner?" No response. So he tries again at 30ft. Again no response. At 20ft. he has another attempt, "Peg what's for dinner?" No response again. He tries at 10ft away receiving the same result. In desperation he walks right up to her, "Peg what's for dinner?" "For f---s sake, for the 5th time CHICKEN."

Two women are playing golf and one teed off, watched in horror as her ball landed directly among four men playing at the next hole hitting one player who immediately clasps his hands together groaning as he falls to the ground rolling around in agony.

The woman dashes over and apologises. "Please allow me to help I'm a Physical therapist and know how to relieve pain.

"No no, I'll be alright – I'll be fine in a few minutes."

At her insistence he allowed her to help. She gently took his hands away and laid them at his side, loosened his pants and put her hand inside. For moments she rendered tender artful massage asking,

"How does that feel?"

"Feels great, he replied, but I still think my thumb is broken."

## A MYSTERY SOLVED

Everyone knows about the Second World War Operation Mincemeat and The Man who never was, or do they? The deception story of a dead body floating ashore in Spain [supposedly neutral but in reality the paid servants of Germany] with a brief case of forged documents implying the Allies next operation after North Africa would be either Greece or Sardinia and that the small scale landing in Sicily would only be a feint and to move their forces accordingly when in fact Sicily was the main objective.



A scene from movie *The Man Who Never Was* [1956] Lt. Comm. Ewen Montagu [Clifton Webb] attaches the brief case to TMW, C 'Chumly' [Robert Fleming] assists.

The story was the subject of the movie film [1956] at least three books and numerous newspaper articles. Ewen Montagu the main author guaranteed that the name of the dead body used in the operation would never be revealed and so it remained for over 50 years. In 1962, Roger Morgan then 14 years old school boy, first read 'The Man Who Never Was.' and became fascinated with the identity of Major William Martin; to track down the name of this most unlikely hero became an obsessive fascination. After numerous visits to the Public Record Office at Kew, now The National Archive, the many thousands of hours spent in the tedium of ordering obscure volumes from many libraries, poring over almost useless lists, searching for a name did it really exist? In the Reading Room of the P.R.O. in October 1996, these are his own words of the occasion. "It is difficult to describe the excitement on



opening such an amateurish bound file. I had been in this situation many times before only to be disappointed. This file was so secret that it bore no security markings whatever, just on the spine the handwritten words Volume three – Deception. My eyes ran down the contents page and there at the bottom was the word ‘Mincemeat.’ I turned to the very end of the inch thick file and there in the first yellow foolscap page was his name Glyndwr Michael. This man was a 34 year old Welsh down and out tramp who slunk into a warehouse in London and there eat food contaminated with phosphorous rat poison, died at St. Pancras hospital from liver damage two days later, 29th January 1943. The Coroner for the district was Mr. W Bentley Purchase had previously been contacted by the foremost forensic pathologist in Britain Sir Bernard Spilsbury who had been approached by officers from MI5. Sir Bernard told Mr. Purchase that as part of a vital war mission the Intelligence Service was seeking the body of a male in his mid 30’s whose cause of death could be confused with drowning, Micheal’s body satisfied both counts. The creation of an individual who was to carry poisoned messages into the very heart of the enemy’s operations would have to be very convincing; not just the flesh and bones of a dead man chained to a brief case. A living identity would have to be manufactured. And so it came about that Montagu and his assistant Ft. Lieut. Charles Cholmondeley [pronounced Chumly] concocted Major William Martin, Royal Marines. Who through the false documents he carried was a very responsible officer, had just become engaged complete with the receipt of an engagement ring recently purchased, spent the last few nights before his fatal mission at the Naval and Military Club with receipts, had taken his fiancée to a theatre with dated ticket stubs to prove the occasion, had a letter from his bank requiring him to repay an overdraft, a private letter from his father to take his engagement seriously as well as a photograph of his fiancée Pam as well as a last letter from her. Plus keys, cigarettes, matches and a small sum of money, fully kitted out with a Royal Marines officers uniform and various identity passes and Major went to war. The body had been preserved under refrigeration for three months, then in a container of dry ice for the journey, to the Clyde and placed aboard the submarine HMS Seraph. The Daily Telegraph claimed to have found Mrs. Jean Gerard Leigh whose photograph Martin carried; his alleged fiancée named Pam. Moran contacted the War Graves Commission to have Glyndwr Michael’s name added to the tombstone in Spain. However, one mystery remains unsolved, Francisco Rodriguez who tends the cemetery said in 1994 an unknown hand laid red carnations on the grave on a regular basis, no one ever saw who did it. Martin’s deception was completely successful, the Germans accepted that his story was true

## NOT A FIGHT BUT A MASSACRE and a LUCKY ESCAPE

You may not be familiar with the name 'Rags' Butler but you might have heard of the AMC Jarvis Bay action. Late afternoon of 5th November 1940 the armed merchant cruiser Jarvis Bay [14,164tons] was the only escort of a 38 ship convoy HX84 from Halifax, Nova Scotia to the UK when she sighted smoke on the Northern horizon, this turned out to be the German pocket battleship Admiral Scheer; closing HX84 at long range she opened fire.



AMC Jarvis Bay under fire from the pocket battleship Admiral Scheer

Nonetheless knowing he was completely outgunned Captain Fogarty Fegen turned Jarvis Bay towards his enemy, signaling his convoy to scatter under a smoke screen. An eye-witness described the scene as, "Alone the AMC turned towards her enemy as though protecting a brood of chickens from a fox or cat coming over the fence." It was very unlikely that she would ever get within range with her few Victorian 6inch guns. Soon eleven inch shells fell around her, the third salvo hit the bridge setting the place on fire and shattering the arm of her Captain. Midshipman Ronald Alfred Gardyne Butler RNR known as RAGs Butler, served on the after bridge directing the after guns with a Dumaresq, a primitive gunnery instrument that gave rate of change of range and deflection. When this area was hit Butler recalled, "There was a blinding flash and a ripping rendering sound like a thousand gongs. The man beside me literally burst into pieces. I felt my face warm and wet and looking down say my hands and coat red with blood and stuck on it some utterly revolting pieces of flash and gristle." Jarvis Bay was hit repeatedly on her

superstructure and hull, holed in many places with fires started down below, but all her guns seemed to be in action. Her battle ensign was shot away and in an episode of pure Elizabethan drama Butler helped a sailor climb the flagstaff and nail another in place. Captain Fegen came aft and gave the order 'Abandon Ship' telling Butler to make sure everybody heard it. Butler remembered his Captain's arm shattered just below the shoulder to the fore arm was cranked slightly across his chest, the blood running down the arm glistening showing red where it ran down over the four gold stripes on his sleeve. Fegen then returned to the fore bridge, "He was not see him again." Jarvis Bay sank about three hours later. This single incident of an outgunned AMC taking on the German pocket battleship undoubtedly saved the convoy from annihilation as Scheer could only round up and sink a further five merchantmen; thirty-three ships made port safely. [This total included the tanker laden with over 11,000 tons of aviation spirit MV San Demetrio, damaged by shell fire:- See HMS Opossum Association Spring Newsletter 2017.] As for the survivors from Jarvis Bay, Butler swam to a raft and found himself the only officer. Bravely in the early hours of the next day the Swedish ship Stureholm returned and picked up 68 survivors; sadly three had died, but even more sadly 191 officers and men were lost including their Captain Forarty Fegen. When the survivors reached safety and told their experiences the Jarvis Bay story became known, the self sacrifice thrilled the free world. Captain Fegen was awarded a posthumous Victoria Cross. Butler's service continued on the destroyers Boadicea and Active, then the destroyer Intrepid as gunnery officer, this ship was lost being bombed in Leros harbour. Butler became a prisoner of war, but on his third attempt escaped by a stolen boat and reached Beirut where he caught a aircraft for Cairo. He accepted a years accelerated seniority in lieu of a bar to his DSC, earned on Jarvis Bay, and appointed to the fast minelayer HMS Apollo that took part in the Normandy landings. After the war Butler accepted a regular commission and retired with the rank of Commander in 1967.

### **IT'S THE WAY THAT YOU SAY IT**

"May-Day, May-Day we are sinking, we are sinking." German coast guard, "State your position, state your position?" "May-Day, May-Day we are sinking we are sinking." After repeated requests from the coast guard to state their position, the German coast guard said "What are you sinking about?"

# ROYAL NATIONAL LIFEBOAT INSTITUTION



A lifeboat in action

Founded in 1824 the RNLI has 237 lifeboat stations operating 464 lifeboats around the coast of the UK, Republic of Ireland, Channel Isles and the Isle of Man. It's from here that the RNLI began. In 1808 Sir William Hillary drew up plans to begin such a life saving service aware of how treacherous was the nature of the Irish Sea. Aged 60 he took part in 1830 of the rescue of St. George packet that foundered off Douglas Harbour the rescue was completed with no lives lost. Queen Victoria's consort Prince Albert gave his royal assent to the lifeboat service, hence forward it's title would be prefixed with the word Royal. Since it's inception over the past 194 years over 140,000 lives have been saved by RNLI. It is a totally self funded charity drawing 65 % from legacies, 28 % from donations the remainder from merchandising and investments. In 2013 their income amounted to £182 million, expenditure £150million. Lifeboat crews are composed almost entirely by unpaid volunteers numbering over 4,600, 300 being women, all alerted in an emergency by pagers, with a further 3,000 volunteers shore crews to launch the boats. The busiest station is Tower Lifeboat station on the River Thames in London who in 2013 rescued 372 people saving 25 lives, that year they launched 465 times. Many lifeboat men over the years have been lost, over 600, the worst being in 1886 when two crews totaling 27 from St. Anns and Southport never returned home going to the rescue of the steamer Mexico, the nearby Lytham boat did save some crew members. The Penlee lifeboat disaster of 1981 is the most recent fatality when 8 men of the lifeboat crew lost their lives.