

Vice Chairman Keith Evans
Commander R.N.

H.M.S. HOOD as Paymaster Midshipman 1938-1939

Commemoration at MERS-EL-KEBIR on 3 July 1940

After the fall of France in May 1940 major units of the French fleet were based at MERS-EL-KEBIR and ORAN in Algeria. To prevent them from being taken over by the Germans and Italians they were fired on by units of the British Navy under the command of Vice Admiral Sir James Somerville flying his flag in the Battlecruiser H.M.S. HOOD, with the aircraft carrier ARK ROYAL, the battleships VALIANT and RESOLUTION, the cruisers ARETHUSA and ENTERPRISE and eleven destroyers. Other options such as scuttling or sailing under escort to a British port were unacceptable to the French service chiefs such as Admiral Darlan.

Lieutenant Ted Briggs MBE Royal Navy, President of HMS Hood Association was an Ordinary Signalman at the time, on the flag deck of H.M.S. HOOD and he described the anguish on the Admiral's face at having to carry out an operation of which he and the men under his command did not fully approve. It was of course a political decision.

The action caused the destruction of the battleships BRETAGNE and PROVENCE, of the two battlecruisers DUNKERQUE had been beached and the STRASBOURG escaped to Toulon where she eventually blew up and the death overall of some 1300 French sailors.

On 3 July last year, 2006 being the 66th anniversary of what was known as Operation CATAPULT, a series of commemorative events to which the H.M.S. HOOD Association of which I am the Vice-Chairman was invited, were held at BREST in BRITTANY. I was privileged and honoured to lead a delegation of 4 Veterans comprising Robert Phillipott, Percy Price, Ken Clark and myself, all in our late to mid 80s, and Paul Bevand our Website Researcher. Robert was also a member of HOOD's Ships Company on 3 July 1940. It was a busy day. After an hour long service at St Louis Church there was the official commemoration of Mers-El-Kebir at Kerfrautras Churchyard at which were present some 300 relatives and friends of the victims, the French Admiral, a French Navy contingent and band, and the Mayor of Brest. Also present were the British Ambassador to France Sir John Holmes and the British Naval Attache Captain Nicholas Butler Royal Navy. With other representatives I laid a wreath, and there were speeches by Sir John Holmes who conveyed a message from Admiral Sir Jonathon Band, First Sea Lord and Chief of the Naval Staff, also by Herve Grall our host and Vice President of the Association de Ancienmarins et des familles des victims Mers-El-Kebir and by myself on behalf of the HOOD Association.

In my speech I referred to the welcome I had always received from local people on many visits to France over some 65 years and to Operation CATAPULT by which the action at Mers-El-Kebir was known. In expressing the deepest sympathy for the relatives and friends of those who lost their lives on that sad day 66 years ago – the father of our host Herve Grall was one such victim as Engineer Officer of the Battle cruiser DUNKERQUE – I hoped for a close rapport between our two Associations in the years ahead.

After the Mayor's reception at the Hotel de Ville, with my wife Heather I attended a luncheon given by Vice Admiral d'escadre Laurant MERER, Commandant la zone et la region maritime Atlantique-Manche du Nord, at la Residence.

In the afternoon we were at St Mathieu Point some 15 Kilometres to the west of Brest where there is a monument to all French sailors who died during two world wars, including the five French sailors who joined the Royal Navy, assumed British names, and were lost on H.M.S. HOOD on 24 May 1941. There were 3 further speeches from Sir John Holmes, Herve Grall and myself, the laying of wreaths, the Last Post and the French National anthem.

In my speech I said how honoured we were to have been invited to today's ceremonies, and our special thanks to Herve Grall and his late Mother. Our thoughts were for the sailors of all Navies, especially for the 1415 lost in H.M.S. HOOD including 5 Free French sailors, for the Navy of France, and indeed for our enemies who lost their lives in the service of their countries, and sympathy for all their families. For the future we in the H.M.S. HOOD Association looked forward to a close rapport with our opposite members here in France.

It was an emotional day and one which we will long remember.

Commander T K Evans Royal Navy
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