

West Wales Veterans Archive

Written aide to the memoirs of Royal Navy Veteran Mr Laurence Brown of Carmarthenshire

- The interview was filmed and conducted by Neil Davies and Steve Munro on Age Cymru Dyfed Veterans project at Laurence's home in Carmarthenshire on the 19th of July 2023.
- Laurence begins by explaining how at the age of 23, he came to join the Royal Navy at HMS Raleigh in 1980. He describes arriving at Plymouth railway station and being met by the Instructor who lined the new recruits up on the platform, before loading them onto a bus bound for the RN recruit training school.
- He then details his training career, consisting of the recruit course at HMS Raleigh, followed by trade training (Supply) at HMS Pembroke (Chatham, Kent), followed by a (Gunnery) course at HMS Cambridge (Plymouth).
- Laurence becomes an operational Sailor and is posted to HMS Penelope F127, a Leander class Frigate. This posting becomes significant in April 1982. Penelope is assigned to Operation Corporate, the military task of re-patriating the Falkland Islands back to British rule, following occupation by Argentina. The significance of the event to Laurence is immediately evident. He recounts strong memories of the return voyage back to the UK, following the war. His convoy encountered a terrific storm, resulting in enormous waves. Laurence describes life on board ship during 3 to 4 days of "horrendous" weather. He goes on to remind viewers that the war was fought during winter, which offered a significant challenge to the Royal Naval ships operating in the South Atlantic Ocean. He also enlightens viewers to the fact that his ship remained on station in the South Atlantic way beyond the end of hostilities. In fact, the ship didn't return to the UK until the autumn of 1982.
- Laurence then begins to talk about life on board ship during the deployment. He recounts the operational routines and the reactions to air attacks from inbound Argentine aircraft. The viewer learns what happened when the air raid siren sounded, as he explains the subtle difference between "actions stations" and "relaxed action stations". He refers to a photograph taken during one of the twenty direct attacks on the Penelope. The Viewer can see this photograph in his WWVA collection.

- Laurence recounts the sights and sounds of the air attacks, including the weapons defending the ship and the Argentine bombs splashing nearby into the sea. He gives incredible detail of the gunnery and performance of the weapons systems deployed to defend the ship. Bofors guns and the Sea Cat missile system being the main armoury, which Laurence felt was out of date and unreliable. Although the frigate had Exocet, much to his dismay, the ship's Captain never had the opportunity to launch the missile onto a target.
- In fact, he brilliantly describes a highly amusing but incredible episode, when HMS Penelope was on picket duty. His friend and himself had nothing available but fresh Vegetables from the stores locker to fire off at an attacking Argentine aircraft. Potatoes, Onions and Carrots were hurled from the deck at the A4 Skyhawk jet, roaring overhead.
- On the other hand, Laurence also tells the viewer about the superb Radar system that the ship deployed, which enabled the ships company to track the flight paths of the Argentine fighter bombers, even as they took off from mainland Argentina.
- Laurence gives an account of another attack by what he believes was an Argentine Exocet missile. After receiving the warning of an inbound enemy missile, he was readied for damage control on deck. Whilst bracing himself for impact, he clearly saw the missile fly over the deck, narrowly missing the ship. He felt that the relatively low profile of the Leander class frigate, was responsible for the missile missing the ship.
- Responding to a question, he recounts a list of the ships around the Penelope that were hit: HMS Argonaut, HMS Plymouth, HMS Antrim, HMS Ardent and Antelope. Of particular note is the attack on HMS Plymouth. Standing on the deck of HMS Penelope, he saw the vessel on fire and was quick to snatch a photograph. The viewer can see this photograph in Laurence's WWVA collection. As each ships was lost, it quickly reported to the crew by Penelope's captain. A fact Laurence says was appreciated.
 - In a poignant statement, he says "*it was horrendous really....we were fighting a modern war with old weapons*".

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Cyfeiriad ein swyddfa gofrestrdedig/Registered office address: 27 Heol y Wig/Pier Street, Aberystwyth, Ceredigion, SY23 2LN

Ffôn/phone: 03333 447 874

Ebost/email: reception@agecymrudyfed.org.uk

www.ageuk.org.uk/cymru/dyfed/

He tells the viewer another interesting story, describing how the ship collected a soldier from the sea. This soldier was flown to the fleet, by RAF Hercules transport aircraft, as an urgent replacement for Leut Col H Jones VC 2 Para. Leut Col Jones had been killed in action at the recent battle of Goose Green. In a planned and co-ordinated tri service operation, the replacement soldier was parachuted into the sea near the ship and recovered by the crew. Laurence shows his pride at the navigational skills shown by the RAF and Navy in successfully completing the operation.

Following the ceasefire and Argentine surrender, he went ashore to visit the Falklands capital Port Stanley. The overpowering awful smell is etched into his memory. He doesn't hide his disgust at the appalling manner the Argentine soldiers treated the capital. He remembers seeing piles of weapons surrendered by the defeated Argentinians. Laurence also encountered the liberated civilian population, whom he describes as "shell shocked" and "bemused".

- On a later visit to the capital, Laurence remembers a calmer atmosphere. The Argentine POW's were lined up awaiting deportation home and the shop had been opened up. His colleague and himself had been detailed to collect the ship's mail, which had been dropped off by RAF air transport.
- His closing memories of the Falklands in 1982 are lighter and happier. HMS Penelope had been detailed to patrol the sea around the islands. Although the threat from the Argentine RAF and Navy was still very real, the task offered the crew an opportunity to enjoy some spectacular views of the scenery and wildlife. Laurence particularly appreciated the beauty of the Jason islands. He described the experience of seeing nature as being a good opportunity for grounding himself, following the intense experience of war.
- HMS Penelope then set sail for home and arrived in the UK in the autumn of 1982. Laurence married his girlfriend, enjoyed some shore leave, but was soon reporting back for duty. The ship stayed at sea until Christmas. After Christmas leave, a surprise awaited the ships company. HMS Penelope had been tasked to return to the South Atlantic and provide protection for the Falkland Islands. This deployment wasn't necessarily welcomed but Laurence offers the pragmatic view that the Navy had lost so many ships in the war, there wasn't that many available for the deployment.
- Upon completion of the winter, spring 1983 South Atlantic deployment, Laurence left HMS Penelope. He was posted to HMS Sultan, a shore base, where the Engineering branch of the Navy trained Sailors from the Engineering branch. It was also a training base for the Navy's nuclear Submarine fleet. On a personal level, he found the Submarine training facility an interesting place and managed to secure some time inside the facility. However, he held no ambitions to join the Submarine fleet. He misis that this was the result of his uncle's experience on board a RN Submarine during World War two. His uncle was aboard RN Submarine HMS



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Stonehenge, which was sunk in 1944 by a Japanese mine. He perished with all of his crew mates.

- Laurence's final years and months in the Navy were mainly spent at sea. He particularly remembers serving aboard HMS Apollo F70, another Leander class frigate. He ends the interview stating that the Apollo was the best ship he served aboard and he enjoyed himself best on this ship.
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