





NAVAL HISTORY AND THE INTERNET
The story of one site – www.naval-history.net

by Gordon Smith

[return to Naval History Homepage](#)

(Draft of an article for a naval magazine)

You discover your great grandfather fought in the Battle of the Dogger Bank in the Great War and that your grandfather sailed in Russian convoys in World War 2, and you want to find out more. What do you do? Well of course, go to your computer, open the internet, type Battle of Dogger Bank or Russian convoys in the search box, and find 1,000's of sites listed. Only a small percentage may be naval-related and even then you may not be too sure how reliable or complete they are, but you've made a good start without even leaving the house. A few emails later, maybe a trip to a decent library, and before long you know more than many naval historians.

But it wasn't always like that. I knew my grandfather had been sunk twice in World War 1 and received the DSM, and that my father had been killed in a cruiser called HMS Charybdis in October 1943. Charybdis had something to do with Scylla in the Straits of Messina. She had fought in the Malta convoys. Her loss off the coast of Brittany, France was "mysterious" – I'm told Lord Haw Haw asked "where is the Charybdis?", her captain had a German-sounding name, my father was a hero, prisoner's had been picked up by the Germans and ended up in Russian hands. We would call this conspiracy theory these days. I left it at that until my 40's when I started to realise I had a father to mourn and find out about on my own terms.

My interest in the Royal Navy, love of the Sea Cadets, and vague attempts to follow the family tradition and join up petered-out in my teens, and I had ended up as an engineer, operational research analyst and eventually a personnel manager, before thinking there must be more to life than boring desk jobs which paid the mortgage. This is when my searches started. I knew the story of Charybdis' loss in outline, but to understand the why's and wherefores, I ended up writing a book on all the major Royal Navy sinkings of the Second World War together with the military and political background. Arranged in four columns covering the main maritime theatres and proceeding month-by-month, for the first time, it gave me some idea of the true vastness of the war, the hundreds if not thousands of ship's lost on all sides, and the tens of thousands of men who were killed, just at sea. I also came to understand that there was nothing really special about "Charybdis" (except that the bodies of some of her crew were washed up on the Channel Island of Guernsey at a significant time in the suffering of the islands, and so she is still honoured today). Wars are often won or lost by the mistakes the enemy make. In this case, the Navy made the mistake – untrained, mixed force, used to daylight actions in the open sea, fighting a night-time action with well-trained and alert German forces off the enemy's coast. More significantly for me, and without demeaning my father in any



EXH.138.0179

way, I discovered he was not a hero. He was a thoroughly nice bloke (told to me by those I tracked down who served with him), a professional who died doing a job of work and no doubt deeply regretting he would not be seeing his wife and young son again. I miss him even more now.

Publisher Ian Allan liked the book idea, and the manuscript was written on something called an electric typewriter. They then commissioned me to write a battlefield atlas of the recently fought Falkland's war. Both books had good reviews, and I really thought I was made – fame and fortune as a naval historian. But that is not the lot of the vast majority of authors, so it was back to a paying job for some years. I approached retirement at the time the internet was coming to the world's attention, and decided to put both of my books, now long-out-of-print on the web. That was in 1999 when I launched www.naval-history.net. At the time I had no particular aims for the site, except that it should have a simple layout, be easy to navigate, and the images load in seconds. Over the next few years, I added the contents of my grandfather's scrapbooks from his time with the North Russian Expeditionary Force in 1919, and a 1921 cruise around the Baltic on a destroyer. Other people sent me material, one of the first being the story of Stoker Harold Siddall who started the war on HM Battlecruiser Repulse in Scapa Flow, transferred to Motor Launches to be sunk off Crete, and ended up a German POW. Another was Petty Officer Basil Woolff who served on landing craft during the Battle of Walcheren.

By now fairly-well established with some pleasant email comments to keep me going, I decided to soft-peddle on the internet side and concentrate on updating all the British naval and merchant ships losses in World War 1. Unable to find casualty figures for the three old armoured cruisers – Aboukir, Cressy and Hogue - lost to one small U-boat in September 1914, I was approached by an American named Don Kindell who offered me complete casualty lists. I was grateful, he eventually sent me the number of casualties for all Royal Navy ships lost and in some cases, damaged in the War, and then offered to send me a computer disc with the movements of the Royal Navy in the first two and half years of World War 2. Oh thank you, that should be interesting. It laid around for a few months, until I got round to looking at it, to discover I had entered Aladdin's cave. Here were the details of hundreds of British, Commonwealth and Foreign Navy ships, almost day by day from September 1939 to April 1942, and all from original Admiralty and other documents. Don then offered me complete Royal and Commonwealth Navy casualties from pre-World War 1 up to 1948 and beyond, although the latter were (but are no longer) incomplete. This was striking gold. I just had to get what amounted to 30 years of research on to the internet with the minimum of formatting and editing. It deserved no less, especially as, as far as Don could see, when it came time for him to depart this planet, his work would probably end up in the garbage can. This was less than two years ago.

Not long after, a retired naval officer, Lieutenant Commander Geoff Mason, now 86, telephoned me out of the blue to say he had written some papers on naval matters, my name had been given to him by "Navy News". Again, would I be interested? Then it transpired that he had also compiled the histories of some 1,000 Royal Navy warships, mainly in



EXH.138.0180

World War 2 – all capital ships, aircraft carriers, cruisers, destroyers, Hunt-class escort destroyers and many more, some in tremendous detail, other in more detail than you could expect to find without a lot of research. By this time, I had learnt not to say no to any offers of material, and as with Don's work, this had to be made available to a much wider audience – again, all 30 years-worth of research.

At the same time, I had an agreement with a number of photographic sites to use their images to illustrate the by now 1,800 web pages that made up Naval-History.Net and they certainly deserve recognition for their contribution, if only to naval history in general – David Page of Navy Photos, Peter Swarbrick of Ships Pictures, Michael Pocock of Maritime Quest, and Steve Johnson of Cyber-Heritage. No website "is an island", and there are many more sites on the internet which have provided information that has been of tremendous help to my own and helped Naval-History.Net to receive such gratifying reviews from "Britain at War", the BBC's family history magazine "Who Do You Think You Are" and the book "A Guide to Military History on the Internet" by Simon Fowler of the National Archives, amongst others.

This leads me to a point which should worry all naval and military historians, and in fact all lovers of knowledge. The internet is an incredible source of information. It is not complete – vast swathes of data remains locked up in books, but it also contains a huge amount of material that would otherwise disappear and certainly never reach a wider audience. A very recent example is a care home worker told to dump a photo album of a recently deceased resident. She couldn't do this, took it home, her husband emailed Don Kindell, he emailed me, and very soon www.naval-history.net will have the honour of displaying the naval career of Norman Welsh who served in HMS Glasgow in World War 2. I also happen to run a website on the J B Phillips translation of the New Testament. This is hosted in perpetuity by an American theological college and when I die, it will still carry on. Not so the often irreplaceable photographs and memoirs on probably hundreds of just Royal Navy-related sites, let alone all the other Navies and Military sites. I have contacted various British naval organisations to make this point, but to date have received no indication that anyone in authority is aware of this potential loss of our heritage. Perhaps readers of this article could take this thought on board.

Some 25 years ago, I knew little about my father's career, the ship's he served on, what they did, the men who died with him, or even why he died when he did. It probably took me ten years and the writing of two books to get to the point where I had satisfactory answers to these questions, and could celebrate the memory of my father on my own terms. Even in the early days of Naval-History.Net, some of the responses were very satisfying – a man emailing me to tell of his mother in tears after he had found out for her for the first time in 60 years what had happened to her husband, his father, lost in a British submarine in the Mediterranean. But now, through the researches of such men as Don Kindell and Geoff Mason, with their lists of casualties and histories of World War 2 ships (with World War 1 vessels to follow), it is often possible to find in minutes what it took me years to do only two decades before. This is a measure of the power of the internet and the opportunities for those of like mind to

work together for their own pleasure and the benefit of
others. Long may it continue.



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[return to Naval History Homepage](#)



EXH.138.0182

1941.

January
 8th Passage to Alexandria escorted by HMAS STUART.
 12th Sailed from Suez for Sydney.
 24th Diverted at Seychelles to search for the German commerce raiders
 ATLANTIS and
 PINGUIN reported NW of islands.

February Resumed passage to Sydney

March Under refit in Sydney.

April On completion deployed for Convoy escort in Australian waters.
 14th Embarked delegation for ABDA conference and took passage to
 Singapore.
 18th Passage from Singapore to Australia.

May Escorted troop convoy from Fremantle to Sunda Strait and returned
 with single empty ship.

June Escorted convoy from Sydney to Fremantle.

July Deployed on escort of convoys between New Zealand and Australia.

August Escorted convoy from Sydney to Auckland and returned to Sydney via
 Suva.

September
 4th Escorted Convoy US12A from Australia to Colombo and returned
 independently.
 22nd Escorted Convoy US12B from Melbourne to Sunda Strait.
 Returned independently.

October Local convoy defence in continuation.

November
 11th Escorted troopship ZEALANDIA from Fremantle on passage to Sunda
 Strait.
 17th After relief by HM Cruiser DURBAN returned independently.
 18th Diverted to search for German raider KORMORAN.
 19th Intercepted KORMORAN 300 miles off western Australian and closed
 when identity given was
 known to be incorrect.
 Soon after first exchange of fire shells from the enemy ship hit Bridge
 structure and damaged
 the main armament fire-control director.
 Fires were started and although guns had to be used in Local Control
 obtained several hits on
 KORMORAN.
 The raider fired two torpedoes, one of which hit forward. SYDNEY
 was disabled and unable
 to move or to fight effectively.
 Fires became uncontrollable.
 Owing to the extent of damage inflicted by SYDNEY the enemy ship
 was abandoned after
 scuttling charges had been set.
 The resultant explosions caused extensive fires that soon reached
 magazines.



EXH.138.0183

KORMORAN then disintegrated.
315 survivors were later rescued and taken to Australia where they became POW.
HMAS SYDNEY was last seen ablaze and it is assumed she sank with no survivors.
Some wrecked life rafts were found a few days later. (Casualty List - note on casualties)

Background & Comments

Naval-History.Net started in 1998 with books written by Gordon Smith:



'an invaluable reference book on the war at sea (in World War 2) ... as well as an informative guide to naval strategy'. *Lloyds List*



'contributed tremendously to my knowledge of the war'. *Francois Heisbourg, Director, International Institute for Strategic Studies, London*

'excellent source for naval history of the First and Second World Wars, campaign summaries and more.' - *Imperial War Museum (London)*

'an absolutely splendid site, invaluable for unravelling the intricacies of naval warfare - the perfect complement to the more general history of the wars' - *Bamber Gascoigne of University Chichester, now www.historyworld.net.*

'a superb introduction to the war at sea and the Royal Navy in particular'. Also listed in the author's Top Ten Military Sites - *A Guide to Military History on the Internet by Simon Fowler, Pen & Sword, 2007*

'simply one of the most comprehensive sources of Royal Naval historical information online'. - *Britain at War, February 2008*

'arguably the best military history site currently online ...'. - *BBC family history magazine Who Do You Think You Are, June 2008*