

ALL PARTY PARLIAMENTARY WAR HERITAGE GROUP

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING
WEDNESDAY 19 July 2017 at 5.30 pm
Committee Room 13, House of Commons

MINUTES OF THE MEETING

Present: Sir Jeffrey Donaldson MP (Co-Chair), Lord Faulkner (Co-Chair), Lord Clark of Windermere, Lord De Mauley, Baroness Golding, Lord Tope, Lord Watson of Invergowrie, Professor Peter Doyle (Secretary).

Apologies: Lord Boswell of Aynho, Nigel Evans MP, Madeline Moon MP, Lord Tebbit

In attendance: Dr George Bailey (BCMh), Ruth Gibson (Battlefields Trust), Roger Hoefling, Vikki Thompson (War Memorials Trust), Colin Wagstaff (WFA).

Minutes of the last meeting. The minutes of the last meeting were circulated. It was proposed by Sir Jeffrey Donaldson MP, and seconded by Baroness Golding, that these were a correct record of that meeting.

Election of officers. It proposed that Sir Jeffrey Donaldson and Lord Faulkner continue as co-Chairs of the Group, and that the other officers should continue in their role. Lord Tope to be Vice Chair Baroness Golding be elected as Vice Chair, and that the re-election of all officers *en bloc*. These nominations were accepted and moved *en bloc*.

Appointment of secretary. From the chair, Sir Jeffrey Donaldson thanked Professor Doyle for his hard work as secretary over the previous year, and noted his willingness to continue. This was proposed by Baroness Golding, and seconded by Lord Faulkner.

Treasurer's report. Sir Jeffrey Donaldson gave a verbal report.

Balance of account: £161.14 in account.

Received membership subscriptions: £0.00

No expenditure

Closing balance: £161.14

Acceptance of the statement of the account was proposed by Lord Faulkner, and seconded by Lord Clark.

Sir Jeffrey Donaldson MP suggested that members might wish to make a subscription of £5 per year, £15 for a Parliament, in order to meet the expenses required for the maintenance of the website. Lord Faulkner proposed that £10 might be a reasonable subscription amount for a Parliament, and this was seconded by Lord Watson. Seven members submitted their subscriptions to Sir Jeffrey (Lord Clark, Lord De Mauley, Sir Jeffrey Donaldson MP, Lord Faulkner, Baroness Golding and Lord Watson).

Sir Jeffrey Donaldson closed the business of the AGM, and invited Mr Roger Hoefling to make his presentation, relating to the role of the Mercantile Marine in the Great War, and the importance of the GWGC Memorial to the Service at Tower Hill.

Mr Roger Hoefling commenced his presentation by thanking the Group for inviting him to speak. He then went on to emphasise the significance of the role of the Service during the war.

Even before the First World War's effects on manpower, industrialisation had drawn workers away from the farms and Britain had become more reliant upon imports. By 1913, 80% of its wheat and 50% of its meat was imported, while 50% of pig iron production relied on ore from abroad. Keeping Britain in business by bringing in food and raw materials while exporting industry's output to the world were the ships and crews of the Mercantile Marine. In 1914, 43% of the world's merchant fleet, some 20 million tons gross, was owned and operated by Britain and the Dominions.

Britain entered the First World War on 4th August 1914 and that dependence upon the sea for vital trade came under threat just two days later. In the North Sea, ten German U-boats began the first submarine war patrols in history. Success came promptly with U-21 sinking the Royal Navy's light cruiser HMS *Pathfinder* on 5th September 1914, 259 on board being lost. More RN losses followed and then on 21st October, U-17 claimed the SS *Glitra*, a cargo ship, on passage from Grangemouth to Stavanger. For the first time, a submarine had sunk a British merchant vessel.

On land, any illusion that the War would be short having disappeared, by February 1915 the Imperial German Navy saw cutting the trade routes as the means to victory, expressed by Admiral Scheer, Commander-in-Chief of the High Seas Fleet, as '*Our aim was to break the power of mighty England vested in her sea trade in spite of the protection which her powerful fleet could afford her*'.

The result was that by April 1917, one in four merchant ships leaving this country was being lost to enemy action, primarily by submarines. This brought HM Government's realisation that starvation and more would force Britain's capitulation within six months. In turn, this compelled the Admiralty and ship-owners to introduce in May 1917 the convoy system, groups of merchant ships being escorted by Royal Navy and Allied warships across the Atlantic in particular. While merchant ship loss rates then began to decline, food rationing, which had been initiated earlier by such as

the Co-op in Bolton, still had to be imposed nationally in 1918. Nonetheless, the convoy system changed the outcome of the War.

The Mercantile Marine was officially recognised by the presence of a Red Ensign on the Cenotaph at its unveiling in 1919. The RAF Ensign was not added until 1943. Further recognition of the service and sacrifice of the wartime merchant service came in 1928 when HM King George V gave it the title 'Merchant Navy', instituting as well the appointment of Master of the Merchant Navy and Fishing Fleets. This is held presently by HM The Queen. By contrast however, a Merchant Navy contingent was not permitted to join the official march past of the Cenotaph on Remembrance Day until 2000.

It was also in 1928 that HM Queen Mary unveiled the national Merchant Navy Memorial on London's Tower Hill. This is now its First World War section and together with those of the Second World War and Falklands Campaign, its 36,117 names mean the Merchant Navy Memorial is the Commonwealth War Graves Commission's largest memorial in the UK in terms of the number commemorated and its fourth largest in the world.

Those named are members of the Mercantile Marine; Merchant Navy; Fishing Fleets; Lighthouse and Pilotage Authorities. They are men and women, civilians all, with ages ranging from 13 to 74. All have no grave but the sea. On the First World War section alone, where two of those honoured are the conflict's only civilian recipients of the VC, 103 nationalities are represented.

A service commemorating all who served in the wartime Mercantile Marine is to be held at the Merchant Navy Memorial in October 2017 to mark the centenary of the convoy system. That 95% of the country's trade is carried by sea when so many think the supply chain consists of only the internet and motorways, gives the service a direct relevance to today's UK.

Mr Hoefling closed his presentation by explaining that he chairs a group of many members representing the Merchant Marine, the CWGC and others. He is working to see where possible that the Merchant Navy memorial gets greater recognition, and to this end he thanked the All Party Group for the opportunity to discuss its role.

Sir Jeffrey Donaldson thanked Mr Hoefling for his interesting presentation, commenting on the vital role of the Service in maintaining the United Kingdom in two world wars. He noted that achieving wider recognition for this role is difficult, and that any effort to achieve this should be applauded. He then invited comment and questions.

Lord Faulkner asked about the event proposed? Mr Hoefling explained that it will take the form of a service, on 3 September 2017, Merchant Navy Day, as well as a commemoration on Remembrance Day itself. He was confident that this would attract a number of dignitaries, and he was of the view that it would be appropriate to invite the relatives of some of the men and women who were commemorated on the Tower Hill memorial, with reading of the first-hand accounts.

Lord Tope commented that his grandfather had served with the Mercantile Marine, and that his father had been a member of the Royal Fleet Auxiliary. He noted that his grandfather's ship had been torpedoed in the English Channel in 1915. This action involved warning shots, using so-called 'Cruiser rules', involving U boats using a 88 mm shell as a shot across the bows. The rules stated that crew and passengers had to be able to take to the lifeboats, before being escorted nearshore. However, the introduction of uncontrolled submarine warfare meant that no warnings were given.

Mr Hoefling found this of interest and offered to help find out more. Continuing, Mr Hoefling pointed out that the Merchant Navy memorial is known as the Tower Hill Memorial on the CWGC website, which is a cause for some confusion for those trying to research relatives commemorated there. It is also the case that the website does not allow a 'single service' search, which would assist those looking for the graves or memorials to Merchant Navy personnel as a whole.

Baroness Golding agreed that these were significant issues, and thanked Mr Hoefling for his comments.

Sir Jeffrey Donaldson thanked Mr Hoefling for his stimulating presentation and closed the meeting. It was suggested that a visit to the memorial at Tower Hill might be in order, and Mr Hoefling agreed to assist in this.

The All Party Parliamentary War Heritage Group exists to promote and support the protection, conservation and interpretation of war graves, war memorials and battlefield sites.

Co-Chairs: Rt Hon. Sir Jeffrey Donaldson MP, Lord Faulkner of Worcester

Vice-chairs: Lord Astor of Hever, Lord Clark of Windermere

Lord Cope of Berkeley, Baroness Golding

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