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# Lancashire

& North West magazine



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The preserved Plot Room of the Western Approaches Command in Liverpool from where the Battle of the Atlantic was directed from February 1941

# The Royal Navy in the North West

Andrew Harris reports

Today's Royal Navy is mainly based at Portsmouth, Plymouth and Faslane on the Clyde but in some respects these naval bases are eclipsed by the historic roles of Chatham, Scapa Flow in the Orkney Islands – and Liverpool; but new and interesting information about the last of these comes later.

The Royal Navy in Northern England and the Isle of Man is commanded from Liverpool by Commodore Gary Doyle – and affable man who describes his three roles as *resilience* providing advice to civil authorities, *outreach* to explain and inform plus *cadets and youth development*. The presence of the Royal Navy in the north west mainly takes four forms:

- Our region is a good source of recruits for the Royal Navy including the Royal Marines and Royal Navy Reserve and is thought to account for significantly more than one ninth - our share of the UK population – of all recruitment. The Regional Command hosts the RN Reserve Unit HMS Eaglet which - with the Merseyside Royal Marine Reserve - trains more than 300 reservists every year. It is also the base for the North West Sea Cadets HQ, the University Royal Naval Unit for Liverpool and their Archer-class training vessel HMS Charger - plus Manchester URNU's HMS Biter.

- 'Affiliations' are when cities or boroughs in the North West 'adopt' a warship with which they have ceremonial and other links. They are a source of local pride ashore and support for crews afloat. Current examples are the City of Lancaster which has 'adopted' the type-23 frigate HMS Lancaster and the link between the Borough of Wirral and the nuclear-powered attack submarine HMS Astute which was commissioned in 2010. A new and more ambitious affiliation is forming between the City of Liverpool and HMS Prince of Wales – the second of the massive 65,000 ton Queen Elizabeth Class aircraft carriers being assembled and built at Rosyth in Scotland. The Royal Navy is also destined to have eight new type-26 frigates and at least five type-31 frigates so there will be many opportunities for affiliating with such warships. Interested local authorities should call 0151-707-3400 or email [navynrcne-nrc@mod.uk](mailto:navynrcne-nrc@mod.uk)







**HMS Lancaster is affiliated to the City of Lancaster**

**Sea Cadets get to sail on one of several Training Ships. Picture courtesy of NAVY NEWS**

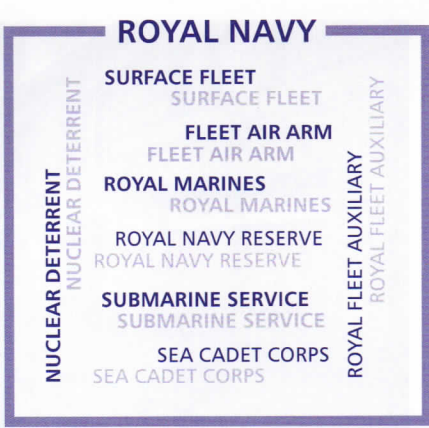


- The Sea Cadet Corps is a national youth organisation sponsored by the UK Ministry of Defence and the Royal Navy. The SCC aims to help young people towards responsible adulthood and encourage them to reach their potential by developing valuable personal attributes and high standards of conduct, using a nautical theme based on the customs and traditions of the Royal Navy. Whilst the SCC is not a pre-service organisation a significant minority of former Sea Cadets and Royal Marine Cadets go on to join the Royal Navy, Royal Marines or other branches of the British Armed Forces. Boys and girls aged 12+ (or 13+ for Royal Marine Cadets) are welcome and some units have a Junior Cadet Section for those aged 10-12 years. At any one time there are about 1,550 cadets in our region who derive these benefits from the SCC.

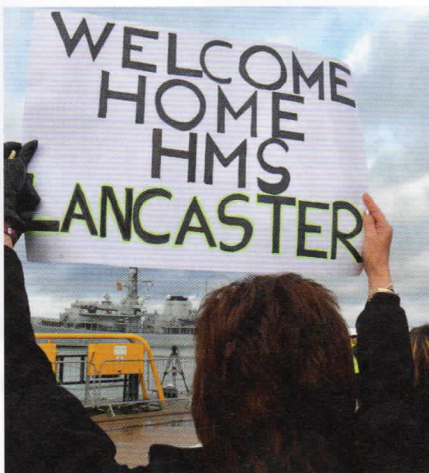
- Ceremonial ashore and courtesy visits by warships have a major role

to play particularly when we are celebrating events or commemorating past sacrifices. It is a way of respecting our traditions and keeping the Royal Navy in the public eye.

A less well known aspect of the Royal Navy in the north west is the history of the Navy's air force – the Fleet Air Arm. From the summer of 1942 to the end of 1943 the Fleet Air Arm had to expand from 2,665 to 6,350 aircraft to cope with the challenge of the war at sea. Work began immediately to build a major Royal Naval Air Station on 650-acres of land outside Burscough. The station was commissioned as HMS Ringtail on the 1st September 1943 and accommodated day and night fighter squadrons, torpedo squadrons, fleet requirement units and a radar training school. For the remainder of the war more than 40 squadrons were based at HMS Ringtail for short periods while they worked-up to becoming operational, converted to other types



**The Royal Navy is the most diverse of our Armed Services. Artwork by Bridge Graphics of Southport**



**You get the message - but does the ship?**

of aircraft or disembarked from aircraft carriers anchored or berthed in the Mersey. Visit [www.hms-ringtail.org.uk](http://www.hms-ringtail.org.uk) for details.

The supermarket chain Booths have paid HMS Ringtail the huge compliment of designing their new store at Burscough in the style of an aircraft hanger. The restaurant includes a display of pictures and text as a tribute to HMS Ringtail whilst there is a statue and memorial outside. All the aircrew who passed through HMS Ringtail and died in the war or since would surely thank Booths for this splendid tribute if they could.

There were other Royal Naval Air Stations at Inskip – aka HMS Nightjar and Stretton south of Warrington – aka HMS Blackcap – which saw similar service. Sadly there is no similar memorial to them although Inskip still fulfils a communications role for the MoD with 4 x 600 feet high aerials and is home to the Cumbria and Lancashire Wing of the Air Training Corps. The runways have been demolished and the concrete used to build the nearby M55 motorway.

Nothing unites the Royal Navy and the North West more than the Battle of the Atlantic. From June 1940 Britain and her empire were fighting alone. Britain’s survival and success depended upon continued supplies of food, fuel,

weapons and ammunition from overseas and especially the United States. Hitler’s U-boats were enjoying early success using easy access to the Atlantic from captured ports on the French coast. There was the real possibility that the U-boat campaign could have stopped Britain prosecuting the war and even starved the country into submission.

In February 1941 it was decided to move the Western Approaches Command from Plymouth to Liverpool where most convoys originated and returned. It was a joint headquarters with 15 Group of the RAF Coastal Command and located in Derby House, Rumford Street in Liverpool City Centre. This is preserved today as a private museum where the key feature is the Plot Room as pictured. The first Commander-in-Chief was Admiral Sir Percy Noble who was succeeded in November 1942 by Admiral Sir Max Horton under whose command the battle was eventually won but at a huge cost in lives and ships.

The logistics of the Battle of the Atlantic were massive. It involved 1,371 ships and submarines of the Royal Navy working with 12 other navies. At least 750 of the total of 830 operational U-boats took part and inflicted grievous losses but more than 510 were eventually sunk. During the 2,073 days of the Battle 330 convoys were attacked;

**Our massive new aircraft carriers: The City of Liverpool will adopt HMS Prince of Wales when commissioned**





**LEFT: The new Booths store at Burscough's Ringtail Retail Park: in the style of an aircraft hanger. ABOVE RIGHT: Booths Burscough Store Manager Richard Ford explains their tribute to HMS Ringtail. TOP RIGHT: The Western Approaches Museum in Liverpool City Centre's Rumford Street with Churchill's comment on the Battle of Britain rather than the Battle of the Atlantic!**

565 escorted ships and 234 stragglers were sunk; 1,100 ships sailing on their own were sunk but nearly 1,000 torpedoed ships managed to make a friendly port for repairs. With help from the United States, Britain always had more new tonnage becoming available than the U-boats and surface raiders could sink. 96,977 ships survived.

The biggest 'cost' was nearly 100,000 British and allied sailors who lost their lives. German losses were more than 20,000 U-boat crew members. It is estimated that the Battle of the Atlantic cost the lives of 120,000 people. Many suffered a gruesome death.

Churchill declared *"The Battle of the Atlantic was the dominating factor all through the war. Never for one moment could we forget that everything happening elsewhere, on land, at sea or in the air depended ultimately on its outcome."*

There were, of course, other battles. 522 of 2,936 pilots in Fighter Command died in the Battle of Britain. 55,573 of about 100,000 Bomber Command aircrew lost their lives. Many other campaigns resulted in terrible losses but they all – like the Battle of Britain and Bomber Command - have fitting and impressive memorials. The Battle of the Atlantic does not.

The HMS Whimbrel Battle of the Atlantic Memorial Project attempted to create a memorial by purchasing and preserving the former HMS Whimbrel - a corvette commissioned in 1942 then sold to the Egyptian Navy in 1949. It was frustrated when the dollars demanded became more

costly pounds. Led by Vice Admiral Mike Gretton, the charity is being re-invented with some new Trustees to work-up and implement a Battle of the Atlantic Memorial in Liverpool where the Western Approaches Command and Coastal Command masterminded this costly victory. Support for this project is invited. If you can help please contact your columnist or Project Manager Captain Chris Pile via [cwpile@gmail.com](mailto:cwpile@gmail.com)

The Lancashire & North West Magazine has agreed to support the campaign for a Battle of the Atlantic Memorial in Liverpool and will feature progress reports in the coming months.

**Andrew Harris ([mail@andreweharris.co.uk](mailto:mail@andreweharris.co.uk)) acknowledges with thanks the help provided by the Royal Navy, the Western Approaches Museum, the HMS Ringtail team and the Whimbrel Project in the preparation of this article. Pictures are Crown Copyright or by Andrew Harris with the consent of the Western Approaches Museum and Booths Supermarkets Ltd.**

