

FLAG HOIST

The Chatham Naval Officers' Association Newsletter

Dear Fellow Members,

As this is the last Hoist before Christmas I want to wish you and your families a joyous Christmas and the best of health for the New Year.

My thanks go to our committee who work hard to give us regular newsletters, social events, support to members in need, sponsorship to cadets, high-quality monthly lectures, keeping our money safe and spending your funds wisely. Without their work CNOA would not exist.

A polite reminder, subs are due in January please. Chasing non-payments is time consuming and for non-payments we will adopt a three strike contact.

Many of use took part in acts of Remembrance in November and we were represented at The Lines by Vice Chair Lt Cdr Steve Small who laid a wreath on our behalf.

This is an important presence at the Naval Memorial

Yours Aye, Jon



Lt Cdr Jon Vanns RNR



**On all the oceans, white caps flow
There are no crosses row on row
But you who sleep beneath the sea
Can rest in peace, your country's free**



Photo by Peter Joyce



Exercise Baltic Dawn

Royal Marines launched covert boarding missions in the eastern Baltic Sea as they sharpened specialist skills ahead of operating with NATO in an entirely new way.

The Commandos are working towards fielding the UK Special Operations Maritime Task Group [SOMTG], which, from next year, will provide the alliance with elite troops able to deploy at extremely short notice to carry out missions such as recapturing vessels and oil rigs, as well as covert coastal raids to pave the way for allied amphibious landings.

Within the task group are a range of specialist teams drawn from across the Royal Navy and UK Commando Force who each bring unique skills to the equation – pilots, boarding teams, engineers and boat operators to name but a few.

To be able to validate that the SOMTG is ready for front-line duties with NATO's Allied Reaction Force, Plymouth-based 42 and 47 Commando carried out boarding drills, launching small boats from support ship RFA Lyme Bay, before a joint raiding operation with the British Army's 3 Ranger on Saaremaa, an island on Estonia's west coast.

"Exercise Baltic Dawn reaffirmed what Commando Forces have always stood for – the ability to strike unpredictably from the sea, anywhere, at any time," said Major Adam Kidson, Officer Commanding SOMTG.

"What's different today is how we're evolving that timeless capability. By operating from a Royal Fleet Auxiliary platform and conducting complex Maritime Interdiction Operations, we've expanded our reach and flexibility.

"With the support of our maritime planners, we've shown that we can adapt to any platform and any mission – a hallmark of the Commando mindset.

"That spirit of adaptability and relentless pursuit of excellence is what has ensured we're ready for NATO's evaluation in January 2026 – and ready for the challenges that lie ahead."

The deployment – named Exercise Baltic Dawn – is the culmination of months of hard work to prepare the 150-strong SOMTG for the front line

– the first time the Royal Marines have created a task group such as this.

The force has taken on a number of tests on their journey to be validated to deploy with the Allied Reaction Force from June, including cold weather training in Norway, intensive staff planning training, and workouts across the UK at Scraesdon Fort and Goonhilly Earth station in Cornwall and Spadeadam in Cumbria before heading to the Baltic to hone their Maritime Interdiction [military parlance for boarding operations] skills.

The training off Estonia's coast is the latest of a series of smaller exercises under the banner of the much larger Tarassis.

Spread across a vast area [Norway, Latvia, Finland and the eastern Baltic] and embracing operations by land, sea and air, Exercise Tarassis is the most ambitious live activity by the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) since it was established over a decade ago.

It is not confined to the Baltic – or even just the coastlines. Thousands of troops, marines, sailors and aircrew, and dozens of ships and aircraft are committed across the Arctic, North Atlantic, Scandinavia as well as the eastern Baltic.

JEF is formed by a coalition of ten nations committed to the safety, security and prosperity of northern European waters, in particular the Scandinavian-Baltic region.

The Commandos carried out the raid with 3 Ranger, who will make up the Army's contribution to NATO's Allied Reaction Force, under the Special Operations Land Task Group.

"The Army Special Operations Brigade has been conducting activity across Estonia under Exercise Tarassis, demonstrating our commitment to supporting our NATO SOF allies in competition, crisis and conflict," said Officer Commanding Special Operations Task Group B – who cannot be named for operational reasons.

"The Army Special Operations Brigade is part of the Army's Advance Force and a key responsibility for deployed Special Operations Land Task Groups is to support the Joint Force.

/cont...

Exercise Baltic Dawn cont...

“Exercise Baltic Dawn provided an opportunity for a Special Operations Land Task Group to enable a Maritime Task Group infiltrating over the beach to successfully conduct a joint raid, with the Land Task Group collecting intelligence on the target prior to the link-up, securing the landing point, providing ground transportation to the target and then together conducting the assault.”



Royal Marines recently completed another Tarassis exercise in the Arctic – testing their ability to carry out amphibious operations anywhere in northern Europe as part of notable allied military drills.

A ten-day workout in the Arctic fjords around Troms County in Northern Norway looked at how the UK's commandos – and Norwegian allies – can, in event of an attack or invasion, bring their leading troops to bear, protect them once they've landed ashore and, critically, keep them supplied for combat using traditional logistics and uncrewed technology.

The largest number of UK F-35B Lightning jets ever assembled on either of the Royal Navy's new aircraft carriers has been deployed to the Mediterranean for a major allied exercise. Flagship HMS **Prince of Wales** now carries 24 British F-35 jets as she leads the UK Carrier Strike Group in the Med after five months operating in the Indo-Pacific.

That is the highest number of the fifth-generation fighters ever seen on either of the Royal Navy's Queen-Elizabeth class aircraft carriers.

The jets – from 809 Naval Air Squadron and 617 Squadron – are there for Italian-led drills – named Exercise Falcon Strike, which will see allied work together on a large-scale air and maritime exercise supporting NATO.

Training with the Italian, US and Greek Air Force, UK jets will take part in day and night training scenarios during Falcon Strike, strengthening NATO's air capabilities, deterring adversaries and boosting the alliance's security.

Commodore James Blackmore, Commander of the Carrier Strike Group, said: “It is fantastic to be back in the Mediterranean after a hugely successful period in the Indo-Pacific and a transit of the Red Sea.

“The upcoming exercises with NATO allies will be a real demonstration of the warfighting readiness of the UK Carrier Strike Group.

“The eight-month deployment covers over 26,000 nautical miles and engages with 40 nations, reinforcing the UK's position as a leading European power delivering fifth-generation aircraft and carrier capabilities assigned as a primary contribution to NATO.”

Joining the Carrier Strike Group for the latest leg of the eight-month deployment is Italian frigate ITS Luigi Rizzo, which joins the 4,000-strong force alongside Norwegian and British warships.

The Carrier Strike Group returned to the Mediterranean through the Red Sea and Suez Canal after five months of operations in the Indo-Pacific.

HMS **Prince of Wales** stopped in Souda Bay in Crete, where Captain Will Blackett handed over the role of Commanding Officer to new incumbent Captain Ben Power.

Type 23 frigate HMS **Richmond** has been operating with the Greek Navy on anti-submarine warfare exercises, while Type 45 destroyer HMS **Dauntless** has also been in Souda Bay – carrying out a Remembrance Service at the Commonwealth Graves.

The CNOA Christmas Word Search

G N Q R H M I S T L E T O E F
 G S L O E L Y T I V I T A N A
 L P L I H I E R B G X P E S M
 M L A R L R N S K E G P D O I
 Y F U R S F R D N F K S I C L
 Y E K R U T E Y E I W N T A Y
 S A W G W R C S M E T O E D K
 Y T N U Z S A N T A R W L V R
 Q E N G B L E S S I N G U E G
 J C N E E R C D Y J V E Y N O
 O P L M S L U R M J I E R T N
 D L F Y I E T A R B E L E C G
 S L G V R H R C H G I E L S G
 E T R E E R C P F R O S T Y E
 G N I P P A R W S N O W M A N

Answers on page 14

Advent

Blessing

Chimney

Family

Holly

Nativity

Santa

Snowman

Turkey

Angel

Cards

Eggnog

Festive

Mistletoe

Presents

Sleigh

Tinsel

Wrapping

Bells

Celebrate

Elf

Frosty

Myrrh

Reindeer

Snow

Tree

Yuletide

Drugs Bust!

Royal Marines took out a drugs boat speeding across the Gulf of Oman as frigate HMS **Lancaster** dealt a £35m blow to the illegal narcotics trade.

Commando snipers brought the skiff – zipping over the waves at speeds in excess of 40 knots while its crew tried to ditch their illegal cargo – to an immediate halt with a bullseye shot to knock out the boat's engine.

The snipers took aim from a Wildcat helicopter launched from the warship to intercept three suspect craft in one of the most dramatic counter-drugs intercepts the Royal Navy has been involved with in the Middle East.

This is the first time snipers have been called upon to use non-lethal force to disable a suspicious boat in the Gulf region – where typically slow-moving dhows are used to hide the illicit cargoes – unlike the Caribbean, where the tactic has proved effective on several occasions.

The operation began when HMS **Lancaster** launched her Wildcat from 815 Naval Air Squadron on a dawn patrol over the Gulf of Oman.

Her crew soon picked up three suspicious skiffs travelling at speed – and secretly shadowed them while relaying critical information back to the warship.

That allowed **Lancaster** to launch her Peregrine drone to continue monitoring the skiffs – again undetected – providing a live video feed to the ship's operations room.

Meanwhile, the Wildcat returned to refuel and embark a Maritime Sniper Team from 42 Commando – the Royal Marines' specialists in boarding operations – to close in for the interception.

When the helicopter appeared over the skiffs, their crews immediately increased speed to more than 40 knots and began hurling their cargo into the water to reduce weight. Ultimately, it led to two of the skiffs being abandoned – but not the third which persisted in trying to get away.

At this point, the marines targeted the outboard engine, neutralising it with a single round, while

crew of the warship's sea boat recovered the discarded packages and located a partially-submerged abandoned skiff.

More than 1½ tonnes of drugs were recovered in all – heroin, crystal methamphetamine and hashish with an estimated UK street value in excess of £35 million.

The operation highlights HMS **Lancaster's** capability to deter illicit activities and disrupt the narcotics trade.

"I'm hugely proud of the team's professionalism, patience, and skill throughout what was a protracted chase," said Commander Sam Stephens, Commanding Officer of HMS **Lancaster**.

"This operation saw **Lancaster's** crewed and uncrewed aircraft working hand-in-glove under the direction of the ship's operations room. The outcome was a highly-successful bust, removing large quantities of narcotics from the streets and preventing their profits from fuelling extremism."

Wildcat pilot Lieutenant Guy Warry added: "Non-lethal disabling fire has not been seen in the region and was essential in preventing the drug runners from moving their product.

"Being the Wildcat pilot carrying out a live weapons firing on drug-running skiffs whilst flying backwards to provide a stable platform for the snipers was definitely a career highlight.

The ship's success was praised by Minister for the Armed Forces Al Carns.

"Halting a boat travelling at 40 knots with a single non-lethal shot from a Royal Marines sniper is remarkable, and a real testament to the skill and training of our personnel," he said.

"This interdiction is a true testament to the high levels of training that both the flight, MST and ship have achieved prior to the bust."

"This operation highlights the unique role our Royal Navy contributes, working to disrupt criminal operations around the world, keeping us secure at home and strong abroad."



CNOA Forms

The forms for joining and for the CNOA bursaries can now be found on the CNOA website

Joining forms can be downloaded from <https://www.cnoa.org.uk/Membership/>

CNOA Bursaries can be found at <https://www.cnoa.org.uk/CNOA-Bursaries/>

CNOA Website



The CNOA website is due for its annual overhaul. Webmaster, Guy Bartlett, plans to work on this task during January 2026. If any members have ideas to improve the CNOA's digital presence, please contact him by 14th December 2025. Thank you. (mr.guy.bartlett@gmail.com)

MEMBER RESOURCES

Some of our members are pictured below, in no particular order. Any member who wishes to have their photo added should contact the web admin. Photos of the CNOA Committee members can be found on the Committee page.



CNOA NEW YEAR'S LUNCH

Remember, the New Year Lunch will take place on **Saturday 31st January 2026.**

If previous events are anything to go by this will be an excellent event with delicious food, and the famous (or infamous) CNOA raffle as conducted by none other than Chairman Vanns.



CHATHAM NAVAL OFFICERS' ASSOCIATION ANNUAL SUBSCRIPTIONS

**Joining Fee and Annual Subscription**

With effect from 20th March 2023, new members will be required to pay a joining fee of £30 by cheque or transfer to CNOA at the following bank:

Metro Bank Sort code 23 05 80 Account 50484076

Cost £20 PA payable to Chatham Naval Officers Association

Address if required 2 Calverly Road, Tunbridge Wells Kent TN1 2TB

On receipt of the joining fee new members will receive an Association tie or scarf and lapel badge. The Annual Subscription of £20 applies from the date of joining if this occurs before 1st July, and then will be renewed by Standing Order from the following 1st January.

New members who join after 1st July will be required to submit a Standing order from the following 1st January.

Annual Subscription – Current members

The annual subscription remains at £20 and, with effect from 1 January 2024, the subscription will be payable annually on that date. In the first instance, and to allow members time to alter their current standing order dates, a transition period of 3 months, to 31st March 2024 will be in place, after which an audit and follow up process will be undertaken.

**CHATHAM NAVAL OFFICERS' ASSOCIATION ANNUAL STANDING ORDER FORM**

Please complete this form and return it to the Hon Treasurer: Lieutenant Jan Dean RNR, 79A Cherry Avenue, Swanley, Kent, BR8 7OU, or, if you prefer, you can scan a copy and email it to cnoauk@gmail.com. You can arrange a standing order electronically via your bank and, for those using traditional banking methods this form can be used to inform your bank of your instructions as below.

I wish to make my annual subscription payments by standing order to the Chatham Naval Officers' Association.

Your Name: _____

Your Address: _____

Post Code: _____

Name of your Bank: _____

Address of your Bank: _____

Your Bank Sort Code: ____/____/____

Your Account Number: _____

To my bank:

I request you to pay the regular sum of: £20 PA

Metro Bank sort code 23 05 80 account 50484076

Payable to Chatham Naval Officers Association

Address if required 2 Calverly Road, Tunbridge Wells Kent TN1 2TB

Minister rules out two power standard for Royal Navy

A recent question in Parliament has clarified the government's position on whether the Royal Navy should return to the two power standard.

Andrew Rosindell, the Conservative MP for Romford, asked the Ministry of Defence "whether he will make it his Department's policy to reinstate the two-power standard as applied to the Royal Navy Fleet."

His question referenced the long standing benchmark used in the late nineteenth century to judge maritime strength.

In his reply, Parliamentary Under Secretary Al Carns explained that the measure originated in the Naval Defence Act of 1889.

As set out in the written answer, the act required that "the Royal Navy should maintain a fleet at least as strong as the next two powerful navies combined."

Carns added that the strategic environment shaping UK defence planning differs significantly from that era.

The response states that "today our security is underpinned by NATO's collective defence, where capabilities are shared across 32 allies."

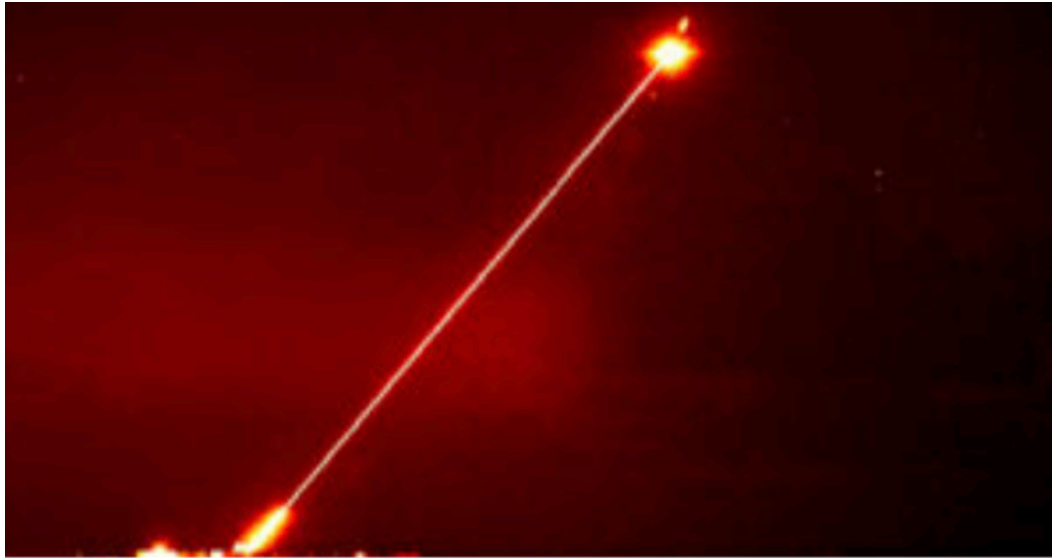
Carns used the written answer to outline the government's approach to fleet development. He wrote that "modern naval warfare still demands mass, presence, and resilience."

The Royal Navy is described as "transforming to a hybrid fleet, moving to a dispersed but digitally connected fleet of crewed, uncrewed, and autonomous platforms." According to the department, that mix is intended to expand available power in what it presents as a cost conscious way while sustaining capabilities associated with a modern NATO navy.

DragonFire - Naval Anti-Drone Laser Weapon

DragonFire is the UK's new high-power laser weapon system, intended for Royal Navy ships from 2027.

It is being developed by a British consortium that includes MBDA UK, Leonardo UK, QinetiQ and the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory.



DragonFire is designed to track and destroy fast threats such as drones and mortar rounds.

Classified

Recent trials at the MOD's Hebrides range showed it detecting, following and shooting down drones travelling at about 650 kilometres per hour.

These tests were the first in the UK to demonstrate that level of accuracy and speed.

The system uses a British beam-combining method that merges the output of many glass-fibre lasers into a single, concentrated beam.

The full technical approach is classified, but DragonFire sits in the 50-kilowatt class and is accurate enough to hit a one-pound coin from a kilometre away.

A turret holds the laser, an electro-optical camera and a second low-power laser for tracking.

One of the main attractions is cost. Each shot is around £10, compared with the very high cost of missile interceptors such as Sea Viper.

Because it uses electrical power rather than ammunition, it avoids problems with stockpiles during prolonged engagements and limits the risk of collateral damage.

The government has brought the programme forward by five years after the successful tests and plans to install it on a Type 45 destroyer in 2027. It is also being explored for Army vehicles and future RAF combat aircraft.

The development contract is worth 316 million pounds and will support nearly six hundred jobs across sites in Bolton, Bedford, Farnborough and Edinburgh.

MBDA's UK Managing Director Chris Allam described DragonFire as a "truly game changing weapon system".

Defence Minister Luke Pollard said it will place the Royal Navy "at the leading edge of innovation in NATO" and strengthen the UK's ability to counter modern aerial threats.



CNOA
Chatham Naval Officers' Association



A Sailor's Christmas

To the tune of T'was the night before Christmas

T'was the night before Christmas, he lived in a crowd,
In a 40 man berthing, with shipmates so loud.
I had come down the exhaust stack with presents to give,
And to see just who in this rack did live.

I looked all about, a strange sight did I see,
No tinsel, no presents, not even a tree.
No stockings were hung, just boot close at hand,
On the bulkhead hung pictures of far distance land.

He had medals and badges and awards of all kind,
And a sober thought came into my mind.
For this place was different, it was so dark and dreary,
I had found the house of a sailor, once I could see clearly.

The sailor lay sleeping, silent and alone,
Curled up in his rack, dreaming of home.
The face was so gentle, the berthing in such good order,
Not how I pictured a Royal Naval sailor.

Was this the hero whom I saw on TV?
Defending his country so we all could be free?
I realised the families that I've seen this night,
Owed their lives to these sailors who were willing to fight.

Soon round the world, the children would play,
And grownups would celebrate a new Christmas Day.
They all enjoyed freedom each month of the year,
Because of the sailor, like the one lying here.

I couldn't help but wonder how many lay alone,
On a cold Christmas Eve on a sea, far from home.
The very thought brought a tear to my eye,
I dropped to my knees and started to cry.

The sailor awakened and I heard a rough voice,
"Santa, don't cry, for this life is my choice."
"Defend the seas this day, So others may rejoice."
The sailor rolled over and drifted to sleep,

I couldn't control it, I continued to weep.
I kept watch for hours so silent, so still,
And we both shivered from the night's cold chill.
I didn't want to leave on that cold, dark night,

This guardian of honour so willing to fight.
Then the sailor rolled over and with a voice soft and pure,
Whispered, "Carry on Santa, it's Christmas Day, All is secure."
Merry Christmas to one and all.



HMS Stirling Castle

Four months after she was handed over from the Royal Fleet Auxiliary, HMS **Stirling Castle** departed West Float, Birkenhead, yesterday for sea trials and training, marking a significant achievement for her sailors.

HMS **Stirling Castle**, which will be based at His Majesty's Naval Base Portsmouth, is the first mine countermeasures mother ship acquired to provide a floating base for autonomous technology.

Commanding Officer, Commander Phillip Harper, praised the crew for their determination and professionalism in getting the ship to sea.

"Taking **Stirling Castle** out of lay-up and getting her back into service in just four months has demanded extraordinary things from my team," said Cdr Harper.



"Fortunately, the Royal Navy is blessed with incredible people at every level, and it is their dedication, work ethic and comradeship that has got us to this point and allows **Stirling Castle** to join the Fleet under the White Ensign."

Stirling Castle had formerly operated by the Royal Fleet Auxiliary since 2023 but was formally commissioned into Royal Naval service in July.

Since then, her 55 crew have worked tirelessly alongside RFA personnel to prepare the ship for sea, conducting essential maintenance, safety checks, and training to ensure she was ready for operations.



Having now completed those checks and sea safety training, **Stirling Castle** will undertake a series of trials and assessments. This will be followed later this year by operational sea training as both ship and sailors prepare to take their place on front-line duties, carrying high-tech equipment, including autonomous surface and underwater vehicles, for specialist mine hunting operations, primarily in UK waters.

HMS **Stirling Castle** helps extend the reach and effectiveness of Royal Navy mine hunting operations and to make it safer for those sailors whose job it is to locate and destroy mines.

The ship marks a move away from traditional Mine hunting, embracing cutting-edge technology as she acts as a 'mother ship' for an array of remotely-operated and autonomous systems which will scour home waters looking for mines.

The ship began life as the offshore support vessel MV Island Crown but was snapped up by the Ministry of Defence in 2023 and underwent conversion at HM Naval Base Devonport to transform her into a vessel dedicated to support mine hunting.

She spent 18 months in the Royal Fleet Auxiliary's care, helping the Royal Navy to keep pace with the evolving threat from naval mines – proving her worth to mine hunting operators.

Stirling Castle will continue to work closely with the Royal Navy's mine hunting warships, but primarily the Mine & Threat Exploitation Group – the Navy's experts in operating autonomous technology and assessing and destroying threats beneath the waves.

That work will continue as a commissioned ship and there are plans in the future to have the ship repainted in grey from her current, striking blue and white livery.



CNOA Events Programme

Date	Speaker / Activity	Subject	Comment
10 January	Martin Watts	Gallipoli 1915	Virtual Meeting
14 February	AGM		
14 March	Derek Goodwin	LNG Bunkers, Cold Ironing and Scrubbers	
11 April	Social Evening		
26 April	Easter Lunch	Maidstone Masonic Centre	
9 May	Guy Bartlett	"Eat Your Carrots!" The Story of Radar	
13 June	Mark Gambell	Seamanship	
11 July	Summer Social Evening		
August	No Meeting Summer Leave		
12 September	Mark Bathurst	The History of Paddle Steamer Medway Queen	
10 October	Trafalgar Dinner		
14 November	Peter Gilbert & Barry Bryant	Santa Fe & South Georgia - Hunter and Hunted	
12 December	President's Christmas Social		

The Association of Royal Navy Officers








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Royal Naval Air Service

Commander Sue Eagles QVRM RD pays tribute to the Royal Naval Air Service



The colossal impact of the Great War has been extensively documented, yet public awareness of the daring and courageous exploits of the Royal Naval Air Service and the influence of Naval Aviation in the First World War is still little known.

The Royal Naval Air Service (1914-18) fought with distinction and valour on all fronts during WW1, pioneering many aspects of aerial warfare, winning two Victoria Crosses and leading the way in innovation and endeavour that was to establish the ethos and spirit of the Fleet Air Arm today.

Britain declared war on Germany on 4 August 1914, and even though flying was barely out of its infancy, within weeks the RNAS had pioneered the first strategic air raids against Zeppelins in their bases many miles from the sea – outstanding achievements in navigation and daring.

Winston Churchill saw the potential of naval aviation from the outset. The RNAS raid on the Zeppelin factory at Friedrichshafen on 21 November 1914, a flight of 250 miles across enemy country, completely destroying the Zeppelin sheds, was an extraordinary accomplishment and is recognised today as the first strategic bombing raid in history.

A few weeks later in December 1914, the RNAS raid on Cuxhaven was another defining moment in history, being the birth of 'Carrier Strike', the first time, aircraft operating from ships at sea achieved strategic effect ashore.

Naval Air Squadrons also flew alongside the Royal Flying Corps in combat over the trenches,

making an important contribution to the Western Front air war.

The young airmen of the RNAS were spirited and ingenious adventurers with a zest for life and pushing the boundaries.

In four short years they pioneered the development of ship-borne combat aircraft, anti-submarine warfare and the first aircraft carrier, skilfully building the RNAS into a highly effective naval air arm.

It is often overlooked that the RNAS also developed the first armoured cars. At its height, the RNAS had 55,000 personnel, 3000 aircraft and 103 airships.

895 Naval Airmen lost their lives, many over France and Belgium and thirty during the Gallipoli Campaign.

The Royal Naval Air Service Dardanelles Armoured Car Division also suffered many losses. The average age was 24 and over a third of RNAS losses were under 21.

The youngest RNAS casualty was Boy Mechanic William James Mackey, aged 17. He died on 5 August 1917.

The Royal Naval Air Service Roll of Honour is held in the Fleet Air Arm Memorial Church St Bartholomew, RNAS Yeovilton.

Their efforts and sacrifice established the origins of the present day, Fleet Air Arm.

We will remember them.



The Royal Navy & Christmas 1914

The first Christmas of the First World War has become something of a byword for truces in the trenches and the somewhat controversial subject of football.

Yet Britain's contribution to the war was not merely confined to the trenches of the Western Front. It is easy to forget the tens of thousands of men serving across the globe in the ships of the Royal Navy and what Christmas had in store for them.

Christmas in the Royal Navy was already a time-honoured tradition by the start of the First World War. Where possible it was a light duty day, the staples of which included the decoration of the ship, Divine Service, an extra tot of rum, a full Christmas dinner served to the crew by the officers, and some sort of show or other entertainment.

However, all of these traditions were trumped by one other, which is that all things are deemed subject to the requirements of the Service.

There were routine movements. Ships to be moved across oceans to where they were needed and regular patrols to be carried out. From the great battlecruisers H.M.S. Invincible and H.M.S. Inflexible steaming peacefully up the coast of South America, as they returned from victory at the Battle of the Falkland Islands, to the multitude of cruisers and other vessels patrolling the World's sea lanes, protecting British trade while destroying that of Germany.

This latter task was seen by many at the time to be Britain's main strategic role and greatest contribution to the war. Among those performing it were numerous Armed Merchant Cruisers – great passenger liners taken into Royal Navy service, armed with a few old guns and manned mainly by reservists.

These ships performed a vital, but seldom remembered service, many on the harsh Northern Patrol line in the storm tossed waters between Britain and Greenland. It was at the same time difficult and dangerous, yet dull and repetitive work, sailing up and down a patrol area, taking to small boats and stopping and checking all passing merchant vessels for goods bound for Germany, at any time, in any weather, with all the attendant risks of accidents, mines and U-boats.

Frequently, they saw nothing for days on end, but these patrols had to be maintained every day of every week of every year for the blockade to be effective. On any given day, including Christmas Day, up to half the ships assigned to the blockade would be out enforcing it. Smaller ships had their own, unenviable Christmas duties too.

For example, at the outbreak of war the Royal Navy had similarly taken into service many trawlers with their reservist crews. They were mainly used as minesweepers, charged with keeping the harbours and fairways of Britain clear of these deadly weapons.

There were also operations. On November 3rd German battlecruisers bombarded Great Yarmouth, causing public and political outrage, and dark predictions from the Admiralty of further bombardments, raids and even full scale invasion.

These fears, combined with concerns about the security of bases such as Rosyth, and even the main fleet base at Scapa Flow, against U-boat attack, meant that the Grand Fleet was frequently out sweeping the North Sea, particularly at times when the danger was felt to be highest.

By the start of December the Navy's leadership believed that one of these times would be Christmas.

"I shall be out with the whole fleet I hope from Dec. 22nd to 26th..." wrote Admiral Sir John Jellicoe "as they may move then expecting the Britisher to be drunk..."

The 'baby killers of Scarborough' bombardment on December 16th, and intelligence seemingly pointing to a Christmas bombardment of Folkestone and Portsmouth, only hardened matters.

The full might of the Grand Fleet, around one hundred ships and some 40-50,000 men, sailed from its bases on December 23rd and 24th.

Charged with the country's air defence the Royal Navy also looked with alarm at the new threat from the air. Germany's Zeppelin forces not only seemed to give them a reconnaissance edge at sea, but moreover had already been used to bomb Belgian cities, and could reach Britain. /cont...

The Royal Navy & Christmas 1914 (cont...)

This new threat required a new solution. So it was that before dawn on Christmas Day, a small force of ad-hoc seaplane carriers, got within twelve miles of the German coast and launched seven aircraft in the Royal Navy's first shipborne air strike.



sent to clear. Within seconds she was gone.

Five of her thirteen-strong crew were never seen again. A sixth died before he could be taken to shore. Perhaps remarkably, they were the Royal Navy's only combat casualties of Christmas Day 1914.

Their mission: to bomb the Zeppelin sheds at Cuxhaven, destroying the new threat in its base.

All the while, to the north of them, the men of the Grand Fleet watched, and waited by their massive guns.

Was the High Seas Fleet coming out for a bombardment? Would it be drawn out by the British force just off the coast? Were they about to fight a new Battle of Trafalgar?

It was not to be. Instead, the Germans responded fittingly to this dawning of a new era, as their own seaplanes and Zeppelins made the first ever bombing attacks on British ships at sea.

In the end, neither was ultimately successful. All British ships and pilots made it home safely (three after hair raising rescue by submarine, and one, Flight Commander Francis Hewlett, after an adventurous escape via neutral Holland).

Their bombing efforts, however, were largely thwarted by fog, though possibly Hewlett did come close.

In a tragic epilogue, at around the same time the seaplane carriers were leaving the German coast, a massive explosion rang out off Scarborough.

One of those many minesweeping trawlers, H.M.T. Night Hawk, which had spent the morning working off the recently mined port, had struck one of the very things she had been

Christmas Day 1914 was, in many respects, a curious one for the Royal Navy.

In terms of operations and ships at sea, it had been incredibly busy for many. Yet in material terms, seemingly little had been achieved for the effort.

The Cuxhaven Zeppelin sheds still stood. There had been no great battle. Instead, the real results were less tangible.

The vital, but slow-burning blockade had been enforced for yet another day, as it had to be.

What is more, both sides had offered a glimpse of a new era in naval warfare and what might be possible in the future.

