

Veterans Commander Pat O'Mahony (left) and Leading Stoker Bill Mynes (right).
(Photo by Ken Mooney)



FIRE ON LÉ CLIONA

Two Irish Naval Service veterans recall an emergency at sea that nearly cost them the ship.

During the height of the Cold War three corvettes defended Irish seas from foreign aggression - LÉ Macha (01), LÉ Maev (02) and LÉ Cliona (03) were three former Royal Navy Flower-class corvettes that had served during World War II. Purchased just after the war for the fledgling Irish Naval Service, these three vessels patrolled Irish waters for almost 25 years. Life at sea is far from easy. Sailors have to continuously train for every eventuality. During an annual training exercise on May

29th, 1962, a sailor's nightmare occurred – fire.

The post war/emergency newly formed Naval Service that former Commander Pat O'Mahony and Leading Stoker Bill Mynes joined was far different than the eight vessel fleet of today's service. At the time Ireland's reach out to sea did not go too far beyond the sight of land.

Pat who was originally from Kerry was going to school and living in Dublin when he joined the Naval Service in 1950. 'We didn't

have the expertise in Ireland at the time so naval cadets were trained in the Royal Naval College in Dartmouth. After initial training in the Curragh, we were sent to the UK for a year. Then it was placement on the Royal Navy training vessel HMS Devonshire'.

HMS Devonshire was a 633ft long (193m) County-class heavy cruiser. During wartime, she was 13,315 tons fully loaded and had a crew of 784. For three Irish cadets this World War II veteran was their introduction to the high seas.

LÉ Cliona.

(Image courtesy of Irish Naval Service Photo Section)



‘We were in good company. There were three Irish and about eighty Royal Navy cadets. It was some experience. You then returned home and served a year and nine months on the corvettes. On our corvettes, you applied the skills you learned in the UK with the Royal Navy. Then it was back to the UK to the naval college and then courses in a variety of establishments along the south coast, such as the anti-submarine school or the gunnery school on Whale Island in Portsmouth’. Pat remembered.

Moving from school to school for over a year Pat finally finished up in Greenwich where he conducted a war course. As he pointed out it was the Cold War and the Irish corvettes were originally built for anti-submarine duties. It was nearly three years before an Irish cadet was finally home for good.

From Cabra Bill Mynes followed his brother into the Naval Service in 1958. Bill

got to know Haulbowline Naval Base very well. ‘Our training was broken into military training and seamanship. However, what I remember the most is starving for the first few days. It was not my mother’s cooking that’s for sure’.

Bill’s brother was a Stoker and he decided to go down the same path. ‘A Stoker is a rank you don’t hear anymore. It was a rank given to those who worked in the boiler and engine room. The Cliona for example had a single shaft with 2 x fire tube Scotch boilers and 1 x 4-cycle triple-expansion reciprocating steam engine. We did this training on the island’.

Life at sea was very tough. The corvettes for example had an open bridge. This meant no roof and no windows. ‘You were completely exposed to the elements’, said Pat, ‘winter storm or summer you were up there exposed to the elements. They were good sea vessels I will admit but they did



HMS Devonshire

not like heavy weather. As the bow went down into the swell, the sea would break over the entire vessel over the open bridge. If you were on watch, you were drenched. In addition, if you were not drowned on the first wave the second or third got you. Cold right to the bone’.

Naval personnel at the time were issued with black South Westers. These were an oilskin rubber hat, rain jacket and trousers. ‘Like the guy on the tuna can,’ laughed Bill.

Both veterans did not have too many nice memories of the kit during the early years of the Naval Service.

The corvettes had a complement of 5 officers and 74 ratings. An officer had a cabin to himself, whereas the rest of the crew had to share berths of up to 25. Not exactly the most private of conditions. The junior officer on the ship was the Anti-Submarine and Gunnery officer. Officers and ratings carried out watches in their respective divisions – four hours on eight hours off. With only five officers onboard the pressure was on when at ‘emergency stations’ as Pat remembered. ‘I was tough, but when you had to do watch on watch off during emergencies, you were really put to the edge of your collar. Moreover, you may have to do this for over 24 hours depending on the emergency. You have to remember there were only three Watch Keepers on the ship, so there was very little flexibility’.

For Bill each watch alternated between the boiler and engine rooms. Putting it into perspective the boiler room was down the full height of a house. The exhaust from the two boilers went up the one stack. The vertical space above the vessel’s engine room extending into its stack, usually covered by an iron grating was known as a fiddley. This also applied to the framework around the opening itself. ‘You did what was called a “greaser watch” in the engine room. Meaning you had to make sure; the engines were topped up with oil and did not overheat. They were big triple expansion engines built on the Clyde. If they were overheating, you would hear a big bang and

have to slow down. Sometimes you might have to replace a bearing’.

very easy. With Irish Territorial Waters, being so small back then some vessels took the chance and ran for it. Both men laughed as they recalled several times when this happened. As they pointed out they were on a warship and, if in range, a few shots across the bow soon put a stop to any chase.

‘We also had to deal with a lot of mines at the time. These were left over from World War II,’ recalled Bill, ‘They would come adrift from their moorings and just float about. Sometimes they would get caught in a trawler’s nets. More often than not, you would just be back in and sitting in the cinema in Cobh. A flash would come across the screen to report back to base. We’d have to go out and destroy it’.

‘Weekend after weekend I remember, you’d only be in after a three week patrol and you’d get a call “mine spotted off the Wexford coast”. They were always coming up on the Wexford coast. That was your weekend over’, Pat recounted.

By the time the two naval veterans served together on the LÉ Cliona Pat was a 1st Lieutenant,

the ships Executive Officer, while Bill was a Leading Stoker. It was during an annual exercise 12 miles south of the Daunt Lightship, on May 29th, 1962, that brought the two men and the ship to national attention.

The corvettes were armed with a single BL 4 inch Mk IX LA gun, a single Vickers 2-pdr pom pom, two (single) 20mm Oerlikon AA Guns, one Hedgehog mortar, 4 depth charge throwers and two depth



The fire on LÉ Cliona was captured by the press who were on board to record the exercises.

At the time, the Naval Service primary function was fishery protection. The two veterans recalled the huge Russian factory ships that dwarfed everything around them. Officers and ratings alike however had to train for any eventuality or task given to them by the State. Search and Rescue and anti-gunrunning missions were very common at the time. Launching and inspecting vessels back then did not sound

Over the years Bill and Pat have researched everything there is to know about LÉ Cliona. They discovered when the ship served in the Royal Navy as HMS Bellwort the exact same accident occurred.
(Photo by Ken Mooney)



ruptures to the oil lines in No. 2 boiler room where Bill was on station. The compartment burst into flames. Bill had no idea what had just happened but reacted straight away knowing if the fire spread to the fuel tanks, the ship was gone. 'For the depth charge run we were producing a lot of steam to take the ship up to 16 knts in order to clear the depth charges. When the explosion happened, I heard a crack and the ship lifted up. Very quickly, there was flames and black smoke everywhere. Fuel lines had clearly been ruptured. I knew we did not have much time and the prospect of being burnt or scalded alive did not appeal to me very much. I told the two young Ordinary Seamen that were in the room with me to get to safety. I then isolated the circulating valves and cut off the oil to the furnaces. It was then my turn to get out of there. To get out you had to go up a ladder onto the fiddley above the two boiler rooms. The head the flames you could not see a thing.

I will not tell you what was going through our heads'.

Explaining in more detail Bill explained that if a fire occurred in the boiler or engine rooms there were valves on deck that would release steam into the compartments to put out the fire. In this eventuality, the Stokers knew that this would happen and time was against them before damage control crews on deck turned on the steam valve to put out the fire.

From the bridge, Pat was sent down to coordinate the fire fighting effort. They had no idea what had happened to Bill and the two seamen or if they were alive or dead. By the time, Pat got to the port alleyway the flames and smoke were so intense the damage control fire fighters could not get near the boiler rooms. 'They tried to go in but were driven back with burns. The hose on a fire extinguisher hanging nearby was melted. I could not ask anyone to go in so I had to go in myself. I noticed there was a

space between the flame and the walkway. I crawled in with the hose line and I sprayed the source of the fire from what I could see through the smoke and flame. I also sprayed on the fuel tanks. I really thought my number was up'.

Pat fought the flames not knowing how many of the crew were still down there. 'The fire was eventually brought under control with the aid of the entire crew. Word finally got to me that all who had been in the boiler room had got out safely except for a few burns'.

LÉ Cliona was towed back home and the injured crewmembers, including Pat and Bill, were sent to Cork City hospital. The ship and everyone on board were lucky to be alive as the situation could have been a lot worse. Bill left the Naval Service a few years later and went on to have a long career in An Post. Pat stayed on and rose to the rank of Commander. The two have remained close friends ever since.