

THE GEORDIE GUNBOAT



The Story of HMS NEWCASTLE



A celebration of 25 years
continuous service

Commissioned 23 March 1978

Contents

	<i>Page</i>
FOREWORD	
THE BUILDING OF HMS NEWCASTLE	I
THE EARLY YEARS	4
THE MIDDLE YEARS	14
OLD AGE	30
AFFILIATIONS	45
SALTY BEAR	47
TYPE 42 DESTROYERS	48
PREVIOUS HMS NEWCASTLES	50
ABBREVIATED HISTORY OF HMS NEWCASTLE	54
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	65
SPONSORS	66

Foreword

This is the story of HMS NEWCASTLE, the longest serving of the Royal Navy's surviving Type 42 destroyers. It relives the history of the ship and her Company over 25 years of service, highlighting the strength of the relationship established with Newcastle, the city of her birth. It also provides a useful insight into life at sea in the Royal Navy and how destroyers and frigates are employed.

The "Geordie Gunboat", the name by which NEWCASTLE is affectionately known, was built on the Tyne and commissioned in 1978. From the start a very close relationship was established with the City of Newcastle and the people that built her all those years ago. The ship has a number of affiliations with organisations in the city and supports several local charities. Whenever NEWCASTLE visits the Tyne the Ship's Company receives a fabulous welcome from the people of this tremendous city, which is regarded by many as the best run-ashore in the Royal Navy.

Over the years NEWCASTLE has served all over the world. She has regularly been seen in the South Atlantic, in the Caribbean and in the Gulf providing a visible and credible maritime presence to deter aggression, or, more subtly, to represent the UK's continuing commitment and interest in various regions. Like other warships, the ship's operating pattern over the past 25 years has been cyclic. Time and again NEWCASTLE has emerged from a maintenance period to conduct trials before working up to peak operational capability ready for a deployment or other tasking. On a regular basis the Ship's Company has endured the trials and tribulations of refits, maintenance and meeting the expectations of the Sea Training Staff before enjoying many good times as NEWCASTLE has made her way around the world.

NEWCASTLE has a reputation for being a happy ship, a good "team ship" that has always been held in high regard. Countless individuals have served in her and the quality and spirit of her crew over the past 25 years stands out from the recollections of all those who have contributed to this book. Over the years the Ship's Company has repeatedly overcome the tests of operating a complex warship with vigour and determination and with the sort of humour that only springs from self-confidence, unswerving trust in one's team mates, and pride in their ship and the Service in which they serve.

This book has been compiled primarily from the recollections of those who have served in NEWCASTLE, particularly her previous Commanding Officers. My thanks go to all those who have contributed in so many ways towards producing this book. Without them and the dedicated work of our small team on board, who have worked tirelessly to bring this book together, none of this would have been possible.

Commander Jeremy Blunden
Commanding Officer HMS NEWCASTLE
January 2003

The building of HMS NEWCASTLE

The story of the eighth HMS NEWCASTLE began on 11 November 1971 when an order for a Type 42 destroyer was placed with Swan Hunter Shipbuilders. She was the fifth ship of the class to be ordered for the Royal Navy although ended up being the third to enter service. Newcastle was built in Swan Hunter's Neptune Yard on the River Tyne and was known initially as Ship 61. The first tangible sign of the new ship was the laying-down of a prefabricated keel section on 21 February 1973.



The laying down of the first section of the keel on 21 February 1973 (Photo: Swan Hunter Shipbuilders Ltd)

The first members of NEWCASTLE's Ship's Company joined in January 1975 - the Marine Engineering Officer and some office staff. By then the hull and compartments within were complete and some of the superstructure was in place. The role of the early joiners was to make themselves familiar with the ship, to assist the Ministry of Defence overseers who make inspections throughout the building of a ship, and to give specialist advice on the installation of equipment. Before acceptance NEWCASTLE belonged to the shipbuilder and with certain exceptions the officers and men had no responsibility for the ship.

NEWCASTLE was named and launched on 24 April 1975 by Mrs Sylvia Rodgers, the wife of the then Minister of State for Defence. The naming ceremony was unusual in that the bottle of champagne refused to break on striking the stem of the ship and NEWCASTLE was away gathering speed down the slipway before a second attempt could be made. Mrs Rodgers had to pursue the ship in a launch and finally performed the naming ceremony in the middle of the river.

THE BUILDING OF HMS NEWCASTLE



By the end of 1975 NEWCASTLE was becoming recognisable. Much of the superstructure had been completed and the masts and funnel had been lowered into position. The Olympus and Tyne engines, the diesel generators, main switchboards and power Cables had all been installed and work was in progress toward fitting out mess decks and bathrooms.

Much of 1976 was devoted to fitting the weapons and the mass of auxiliary equipment a warship needs, and also to make the propulsion system ready for sea. By February the sonar and Sea Dart launcher were installed. In March the propellers were fitted to the shafts and work began on fitting the magazine hoists and hydraulic systems, radio and radar sets and the computer and its displays.

By August, the 4.5" gun was in position, as were the radar aerials and upper deck machinery, and the diesel generators were providing electricity for the ship. November came and the installation of the computer was finished as were the more humble but equally important laundry and galley. The engines were run for the first time and the Sea Dart system was completed and handed over to the care of the ship's staff.

Thus it was that at the end of 1976 NEWCASTLE was, in outward appearance, much as she would be in service. The next step should have been the running of the Contractor's Sea Trials. To this end the shafts were turned by the main machinery for the first time and the steering gear and stabilisers were proved to work satisfactorily. However, in January of 1977 unforeseen delay was caused by 'foreign bodies' in the hydraulic systems - always a danger when such machinery is first installed and put to work. As a result there was a five-month delay before trials were commenced.

Captain Julian Oswald, the first Commanding Officer, joined in January 1977 only to learn that acceptance was likely to slip to October. Shipbuilding industrial relations unfortunately caused a further four month delay. This was all very disappointing, but there was an upside. The crew had built up steadily to about 60 during the spring but

THE BUILDING OF HMS NEWCASTLE

there was a limit to what could now be done onboard. Most were lodged in the Tyneside area and quickly began to develop the strong links with the city that have continued throughout the years and still survive to the present day. They were to be found helping Sea Cadet units, judging band concerts, talking to schools in the area, playing one of a number of sports or attending evening classes. Less demanding evenings were spent at HMS CALLIOPE as guests of the Royal Naval Association or in a certain public house in Tynemouth.

NEWCASTLE first put to sea on 27 June 1977. Each piece of machinery had already been tested alongside the shipyard, but it was only possible to test the power plant and auxiliaries to the limits of performance while at sea. After the unwelcome delays the sea trials went almost without a hitch.

On completion of the initial sea trials the ship returned to the shipyard for the final fitting out to be done - the furnishing and decorating of what would soon become home to up to 300 men. At the same time the Ship's Company continued the task of embarking and cataloguing the enormous number of Naval stores required to keep a complex warship at sea.

During the Fire Brigade Union pay dispute of late 1977 the Ship's Company manned the infamous Green Goddesses, and did actually put out some fires! Ironically 25 years later the crew of NEWCASTLE again manned those same Green Goddesses during the strikes of 2002 and 2003.

After a further two days at sea doing final machinery trials the fitting out was completed in early 1978. The balance of the full Ship's Company formed up in Newcastle and joined a few days before the ship sailed, in February 1978, for Portsmouth and acceptance into the Royal Navy.



HMS NEWCASTLE on Contractor's Sea Trials

(Photo: Swan Hunter Shipbuilders Ltd)

HMS NEWCASTLE - *the early years*

1978

HMS NEWCASTLE was commissioned in Portsmouth on 23 March 1978. The Guest of Honour was Admiral of the Fleet Sir Michael Pollock, a former First Sea Lord and Executive Officer of the ship's immediate predecessor, the 9,100 ton Cruiser NEWCASTLE. To recognise the developing links between the ship and the North East, two verses of Blaydon Races were sung at the Commissioning Ceremony.



Commissioning of HMS NEWCASTLE 23 March 1978

(Photo: Crown Copyright)

Events in both the Weapon Engineering and Marine Engineering Departments played a big part in the ship's programme over the next few months as the ship undertook its post-build trials. The weapon engineers had to test every sensor and weapon system. Meanwhile the marine engineers had great trouble with the controllable pitch propeller systems. Somehow the hydraulic oil, which has to pass down through the rotating propeller shaft to move the blades, and should be clinically clean, got very contaminated. For weeks the ship operated on one shaft with a large and ugly flushing rig on the upper deck.

THE EARLY YEARS

The ship returned to Newcastle in June to receive the Freedom of the City and to cement old friendships, but not without some drama as the port Olympus engine blew up on the way. The Marine Engineer Officer was not greatly amused by being offered back turbine blades which had shot up through the funnel and landed on deck!



Exercising The Freedom of the City of Newcastle

(Photo: Crown Copyright)

While visiting Newcastle it was decided that the handsome, and very valuable, solid silver ship's bell should remain in the Civic Centre as a permanent link between the ship and city (it hangs on the first floor of the Civic Centre). This precious piece of silver had been handed on from the previous NEWCASTLE and the remote possibility of a returning libertyman giving it a float test was not given a chance!

Having bid farewell to the ship's Geordie friends with sadness, NEWCASTLE returned to the south coast for a busy period of trials, training and visitors. The ship also had her first foreign visit to Bayonne in France. Arriving with perfect timing for the annual fiesta, very little sleep was enjoyed for the next four days. So many uniform caps were exchanged for the special fiesta berets (bright red or bright green) that the crew were woefully short of Pusser's caps for the re-entry into Portsmouth. Uniquely the Customs Officers were asked to bring out 50 assorted uniform caps to Spithead.

In August, 500 of the ship's families and friends joined for the inaugural families' day at sea. Then a sad blow. Just as the ship was about to visit Dartmouth the port controllable pitch propeller system became completely uncontrollable! The ship limped back to Portsmouth, Basic Operational Sea Training (BOST) was postponed and the ship ended up in a commercial dry dock in Southampton. And there she stayed over Christmas and through until mid-February 1979.

THE EARLY YEARS

1979

Again the Ship's Company managed to find some silver linings. An excellent rapport was struck up with the Mayflower Theatre and the chorus girls from visiting shows were frequently seen onboard. The sports teams flourished, and many of the Ship's Company were able to fit in the short courses they needed. Another silver lining was that the ship virtually escaped Flag Officer Sea Training's clutches doing only a much shortened work up of about four days so that the ship's first deployment date would not be missed!

NEWCASTLE sailed from Portsmouth on 5 March for Gibraltar, Freetown, St Helena and Rio de Janeiro. After the hard work and seemingly endless frustrations of the trials period it was with great relief, and not a little enthusiasm, that the ship headed south. Gibraltar was a welcome shopping and sports run ashore and Freetown was the first visit to Africa for many of the Ship's Company. This was, of course, well before the dreadful events in Sierra Leone in recent years which have seen British forces back keeping the peace. The visit was pleasant and interesting, although the more perceptive might well have wondered whether the abject poverty widely evident was not a problem in waiting (as indeed it proved).

On passage to St Helena a Soviet Squadron was encountered, including the Aircraft Carrier MINSK. They were making a long and slow passage from Murmansk around the Cape of Good Hope and through the Malacca Straits to Vladivostock - and they looked less than impressive - mainly bored! Very little flying activity was observed but the Ship's Company were amused by the efforts of some of their sailors to find a discreet spot where they could wave to NEWCASTLE without being seen by their own Commissars!

NEWCASTLE crossed the Equator and received King Neptune and his terrifying band of courtiers onboard for the first time. Pleas from those who had crossed the line before fell on deaf ears and few escaped initiation!



Crossing the line ceremony

(Photo: Crown Copyright)

When the ship arrived at St Helena it was the first time for everyone onboard - not many people in the Navy get to visit this historic, remote, volcanic island where time has almost stood still since the death of Napoleon. Captain Oswald happened to have an 89-year-old Great Great Aunt living there and was able to fly ashore in the Lynx helicopter with her birthday cake on his knees.