

## THE MIDDLE YEARS

A good spoof was perpetrated on the youngsters as the ship headed towards the Panama Canal. Volunteers were called for to act as lock gate openers. A number took it up, polishing their boots and undergoing selection tests over the few days before the ship transited the Canal on 26 August. The Panama Canal is one of the great wonders, built at massive human cost, cut into rock in many places and through hot and very noisy jungle for the rest. It proved a strange feeling to be "trapped" once locked in, with all the warship's power to roam constrained. At the Atlantic end, once free, the ship sped away for a visit to Fort Lauderdale before returning to Portsmouth on 21 September. The remainder of the year was spent maintaining the ship, conducting training on the South Coast and on leave.



*The Panama Canal*

(Photo: Crown Copyright)

### 1990

In the early months of 1990 between training at Portland and a JMC off the north of Scotland, all in appalling weather, the ship enjoyed another excellent visit to Newcastle. Sons of members of the Ship's Company and members of affiliated organisations were embarked for the passage from Portsmouth to Teesport. There the ship embarked the Lord Mayor of Newcastle, local TV and press, children from the ship's affiliated schools and sea cadets for a few hours at sea and the trip up the Tyne. As usual the ship opened to the public but also dedicated the Sunday to the workers of the Scottish and Newcastle Brewery, a company that has always been most hospitable to the Ship's Company. An excellent Ship's Company dance was held and the football team got thrashed 9-1 by Newcastle United even though the teams swapped goalkeepers at half-time. A real coup for the ship was the presentation of Magpie shirts for use by the ship's team.



*At home with Newcastle United*

(Photo: Crown Copyright)

After the winter exercises around the UK in some of the roughest seas the Ship's Company had seen, the Caribbean was a popular destination for the ship's next deployment which started on 9 April. The first task was a short one on the trials range off Andros Island where the Lynx dropped Stingray torpedoes against HMS TRENCHANT who in turn fired the new Spearfish heavyweight submarine torpedo at NEWCASTLE. The latter was a very large weapon and although set to pass under NEWCASTLE's keel, it was a relief when it did!

The ship went to Miami to be briefed on counter-drug operations with the US Coast Guard, a task the RN had only recently committed to. However, before starting operations the ship had an unusual role in the re-start of the Whitbread Round the World Race off Fort Lauderdale in Florida. NEWCASTLE was to act as an official "obstruction" marking the seaward limit of the course from the start-line to the first turning buoy. The ship sailed with VIP guests embarked, amidst a throng of boats, including the large competitors, and when the starting gun sounded ran into immediate "rule of the road" problems. While the ship had been told not to give way if a competitor approached, the competitors seemed oblivious of NEWCASTLE's purpose. This resulted in close encounters, engines astern and much irate gesticulation from the yachtsmen. Warships may be versatile but Commander Daglish could not recommend this task.

The ship made a much better and more important impression in the drug interception operations. It was the first time that a Type 42 destroyer had been fully used in this role with its data links and long-range air defence radar. These meant that the ship could work closely with the US Coast Guard cutters and their headquarters and the ship was able to look for drug-trafficking aircraft over a large sea area between Haiti and Jamaica.

After a period exercising with British Forces in Belize, the ship moved into the diplomatic phase of the deployment supporting British interests in the region with a show of Naval power and goodwill, and showing unity with Caribbean authorities in their battle against drugs trafficking and terrorism. Hospitality was extended to governors, high commissioners, foreign ambassadors, happy ex-patriots and of course local chief ministers and their people. A ceremonial guard and colour was paraded ashore for the Queen's Birthday Parades in Anguilla and Montserrat, drawing spontaneous applause. In Montserrat 70 men worked to repair hurricane damage wrought on houses, the hospital and equipment.



*Winching from the Lynx*

(Courtesy of James Cooper)

In Barbados the ship prepared for Exercise TRADEWINDS 90 in support of the West Indian Regional Security System. Two hundred Royal Marines in various places made up the "enemy". The Lynx was used a great deal to move people around often landing in difficult places ashore. The ship landed a police company on Union Island and the ship's own landing party was put ashore for guarding tasks in Cannouan Island and then on Tobago Keys to capture

"terrorists". These Royal Marines had been enjoying quite a good time on the beach until NEWCASTLE took them by surprise, creeping up close to the land to avoid detection and launching men in jumbo geminis with the Lynx flying to distract attacks!

## THE MIDDLE YEARS

The ship went on to St Kitts and Nevis with an unusual task to complete for which the Ship's Company had been preparing for some time - to dance the hornpipe and sing sea shanties. St Kitts' government and people were celebrating the 300th anniversary of the storming of Brimstone Hill by Admiral Rodney and the establishment of an important Caribbean fortress. NEWCASTLE was required to provide sailors to pull cannon up the hill singing as they went and dance in the arena at the top. Volunteers had borrowed clothes and straw hats from HMS WARRIOR and had trained hard, their dress rehearsal being assessed and acclaimed by the rest of the Ship's Company in Barbados. The event was a huge success and much applauded. The hornpipers themselves enjoyed it so much they were eager to perform again, and they had their opportunity after the next visit to Cartagena in Columbia. This being one of the cities sacked by Drake, the Royal Navy had not always been made as welcome as NEWCASTLE was on this occasion. Despite the Defence Attaché's warning that murder was common, Cartagena proved a very good run ashore after all the careful diplomacy, ceremonial and exercises in the West Indies.



*Performing the Hornpipe*

(Photo: Courtesy of Captain Hugh Daglish)

Going on to Grand Turk the hornpipers performed again at a reception given by the Governor and in front of Captain Essenhigh, the Captain of NEWCASTLE's Squadron. As his ship did not have a hornpipe team, it was not clear what he felt about it! For those who did it the feeling was clear. As one of them put it, "this is what the Navy is all about". Heritage is important. It was a good way to finish and the ship sailed for Roosevelt Roads in Puerto Rico for a few exercises with the US Navy and then home at the beginning of August.

### **1991**

From September 1990 until May 1991 NEWCASTLE was in Portsmouth for docking and capability update. Docking periods are never easy. Conditions onboard were uncomfortable with dockyard work disrupting the usual order but the Ship's Company kept in good heart with plenty of training, sports competitions and expeditions. The ship emerged from the Naval Base with some big improvements to her capability. Radar 996 replaced 992, the Sea Dart fire control radars were much improved, new missile decoys and propellers were fitted, 20mm Gambos replaced the Oerlikons and a new Electronic Surveillance System was fitted. Mess decks were thoroughly refurbished and 3F Mess was swapped with the Naval Store - a necessary change as the transmissions from the 2016 sonar beneath the Mess made conditions intolerable.



## THE MIDDLE YEARS



*HMS NEWCASTLE as she appeared in 1991*  
(Photo: Crown Copy right)

The subsequent sea trials went very well in the main but Critical difficulties with the new 996 radar and the Sea Dart magazine meant the ship lost her Rededication Ceremony in order to catch up with the programme.

Commander David Harbun assumed command of HMS NEWCASTLE at the end of July for one of the most exciting periods of her career. The first real task following the docking period was a visit to the Tyne in October 1991. It goes without saying

that Geordie hospitality won the hearts of the first timers whilst the more seasoned hands knew what to expect and were not disappointed. The Ship's Company were overwhelmed by the depth of affection for the ship. Long standing liaison links were renewed and the Freedom of the City was exercised with bayonets fixed, drums beating and Colours flying. The Sea Order Book for 13 October stated: "The Brown Ale Bottle is to be struck before the mouth of the River".



*The Brown Ale Bottle*

(Photo: Crown Copyright )

The fun over, the ship headed for Basic Operational Sea Training (BOST) at Portland in November. The seasoned hands knew what to expect but they could not foresee the difficult early days and teething problems of the new Target Indication Radar Type 996. Every time the ship settled down, the radar failed. Every time it failed it had to be repaired and so it went on to become the longest BOST in living memory. Unexpected days alongside were initially greeted with enthusiasm but the novelty soon wore off. After several false starts the ship eventually finished this marathon effort in March 1992. Heard on the Bridge at this time:

Midshipman - "So this is the famous, so-called Portland Thursday War."

Navigator - "No, today is Wednesday!"

1992

With the old adage "The staff are here to help" still ringing in their ears the Ship's Company barely had time to prepare for something much more exciting (and shorter) than BOST - the Far East Deployment ORIENT 92. The ship sailed on 12 May in company with INVINCIBLE, NORFOLK, and BOXER and the auxiliaries FORT AUSTIN and OLWEN. Inevitably INVINCIBLE, like every Flagship, attracted the flak from the escorts. She was to blame for any error or problem and was the source of all ills as she sharpened the group up. She quickly became known as the "Death Star". Heard on the Bridge:

Navigator's Yeoman - "The Death Star is now at six cables, Sir."

Captain - "We'll refer to her as INVINCIBLE on the Bridge please."

Navigator's Yeoman - "Aye Aye Sir. The Death Star INVINCIBLE is now at five cables, Sir."



*HMS NEWCASTLE operating with the ORIENT 92 Task Group*  
(Photo: Crown copyright)

Despite the attention from the Flagship, NEWCASTLE quickly established a good operational reputation. She might not be shiny and new, but she could fight. The Ship's Company quickly realised the value of the months of training. Visits to Athens and Alexandria gave the younger members of the Ship's Company a flavour of what was to come. Piraeus saw NEWCASTLE berthed ahead of the carrier, which unfortunately gave the Flag Staff first sight of the storage area on top of the hangar. The Admiral dubbed it "Steptoe's Yard" and the Buffer was kept busy moving the spare gear around parts of the ship less likely to be seen by the carrier for the next six months.

After some hard work in company, NEWCASTLE and OLWEN were detached for a visit to the Seychelles. Out from under the eyes of the Flagship and off to a sun-kissed beach holiday destination! It had everything a sailor could desire - long golden beaches, azure seas, never-ending sunshine, nice bars, safe towns and the most genuine welcome imaginable. Sadly, many of the Ship's Company never made it ashore, having been hijacked whilst crossing OLWEN and forced to accept the legendary RFA hospitality. The ship was even offered a visit to the Seychelles Guinness Brewery! What more could a Ship's Company have wanted?

INVINCIBLE welcomed NEWCASTLE back to the group by spending a week sharpening her up again on the way to Diego Garcia and Singapore. It was during this period that the Ship's Company displayed one of those curious quirks of the British sailor after being advised that chewing gum had recently been made illegal in Singapore. This had happened after some discarded gum on a door sensor had caused a fire in the underground railway. Possession of chewing gum now attracted severe penalties. An hour after this information had been passed to the Ship's Company, the NAAFI had sold its entire stock of gum! The Master at Arms spent the evening searching the ship, trying to track it down, but not before the Leading Regulator had asked the XO, "What precisely is the offence here, Sir? Possession of a stick of Juicy Fruit? You'll never make it stick!"



*Defence Diplomacy*

(Photo: Crown Copyright)

From Singapore to Japan, first to Yokosuka, which was reminiscent of Small Town USA? The Ship's Company loved it for its fast food, cheap cold beer and shopping. Most saw little of the real Japan beyond the American facilities but those who did found Tokyo an expensive, daunting, brash and unfriendly city. The second stop in Japan was Kure, the port of Hiroshima, where the Ship's Company saw an entirely different country. It was friendly and provincial, the bars and people were welcoming and to a man all those who visited the Peace Park at

Ground Zero could not help but be moved by the clearly-preserved effects of the first nuclear weapon. Merely to read the visitors' book was an emotional experience which most will find hard to forget.

The departure from Japan was not as planned. Kure was in the path of Typhoon Janis and the ship had to sail short of fuel. Avoiding a typhoon is a straightforward evolution, assuming you have enough fuel and can proceed in the required direction. The right direction in this case was away from Hong Kong, where the ship could be fuelled. Ten fraught days were spent plotting the path of the typhoon, making every drop of fuel count, gradually easing around the dangerous area to make ground back towards Hong Kong. This was eventually achieved but not before the ship became perilously low on fuel.



*Entering Hong Kong*

(Photo: crown Copyright)



Many families and friends flew out for a memorable holiday in Hong Kong, the last time that a Royal Navy Task Group would visit before the handover to China. The ship left with a certain sadness with many believing they would never see Hong Kong again.

After the bright lights and sophistication of Hong Kong, the Ship's Company saw another side to the Far East when the ship visited Manila in the Philippines. Poverty abounded and the area had recently been devastated by a volcanic eruption. Time at sea in these waters became increasingly influenced by the threat of piracy and armed robbery at sea.

NEWCASTLE was not considered to be at serious risk but merchant traffic clearly was.

A British-flagged BP Petroleum Products Carrier was encountered on passage through the South China Sea. Her Captain asked NEWCASTLE's destination and requested permission to stay with her for the next few days to reduce his risk of becoming a victim of piracy.

The ship returned to Singapore again for briefings for an intense period of multi-national exercises, which culminated in several days at anchor off Pulau Tioman. The island was as delightful as the Seychelles, but the ship was with an aircraft Carrier, two frigates and a couple of auxiliaries and the beaches were packed. The ship did still manage to triumph at the Task Group Beach Sports Day.

The trip home took in Penang and Dubai in the Gulf then NEWCASTLE headed back through the Suez Canal and into the Mediterranean for the penultimate visit of the deployment to Limassol. The following conversation with Limassol Harbour Radio occurred as the ship approached the harbour:

Limassol Harbour Radio - "Captain, you have Berth Number 8."

NEWCASTLE - "Roger, we don't understand your numbering system; could you please describe the berth for me?"

Limassol Harbour Radio - "Captain, Number 8 is a very nice berth; it is a beautiful jetty with many lovely fenders, a very pretty berth."

NEWCASTLE - "Thank you, can you tell me where it is?"

Limassol Harbour Radio - "Yes, next to Number 7, Captain."

A two day stop in Gibraltar was enjoyed before launching into the dark miserable, rough seas of Biscay and a force 10 in the Western Approaches of the English Channel. NEWCASTLE returned home on 26 November, Orient 92 complete: 200 days, 38,000 miles.

### 1993

After the usual post-deployment round of leave, maintenance and training the ship headed north to Exercise Battle Griffin 93, a NATO Amphibious Exercise in the North Norwegian Sea. just the right time of year for a winter holiday and indeed the Ship's Company would have seen beautiful Fjords had the visibility in the snow ever increased beyond the jack staff. In Tromso, north of the Arctic Circle, many of the Ship's Company tried their hand at skiing, looking less than elegant in their "Pusser's foulies". The ship charged around fjords in the snow and fog, hunting submarines and defending against air attack but this was of little interest to a Ship's Company that knew it was only a few days until the ship entered the Tyne. Forget Pulau Tioman, forget Singapore, the ship was off to Newcastle and was buzzing in anticipation.



*Parade in Newcastle*

(Photo: Crown copyright)

The City turned out to be in poor heart this time. This was the week in which Swan Hunter learned they were not to win a new major warship contract. There was a real fear of large numbers of job losses and the probable closure of the yard, which had built NEWCASTLE. Despite this sad news the ship was made to feel at home once again. All friendships and liaisons with the city, hospitals, schools, sea cadets, the brewery, Barbour, and Bigg Market were renewed. However, as the ship sailed many felt that the Tyne without Swan Hunter would never be quite the same again.

The return to Portsmouth in the spring of 1993 heralded a shift of tone as Commander Alan Massey assumed command for a new cycle of training and work-up leading to another long operational deployment to the South Atlantic. Many of the Ship's Company had changed leaving only a few seasoned veterans of the 1992 Orient trip. As it turned out, the planned four weeks training at Portland turned into eight when the Radar Type 996 performed so dreadfully that the ship was forced in mid-stride back to Portsmouth for repairs. After the summer JMC to hone the ship's war fighting skills, the ship prepared to deploy once again. The ship's seven-month deployment, the fourth to the Falkland Islands began on 8 September in a sombre mood that was not helped by losing a bag of precious mail into the Channel during a Replenishment at Sea. Amazingly, the ship's sea boat crew, under the Buffer's careful direction, recovered the mail, wallowing soggy but intact beneath its inflated lifejacket (praise to the man who thought up that rather sensible precaution!) Commander Massey's journal entry for 13 October 1993 reads "Welcome to the South Atlantic, force eight gales, sea state seven, iceberg watch closed up, ship in State 3 Condition Yankee, and the prospect of 85 hours of steaming, for a two-and-a-half days late arrival in Mare Harbour..."

En route south the Ship's Company continued their team building. Whole-ship events such as the Top of the Rock race, Crossing the Line, the Chiefs' Mess "Penguin Racing" night, Flight Deck sports, a Rock Concert featuring "Queens", and twice-daily fitness circuits once again helped to add a strong sense of community and shared self-reliance among the Ship's Company. Visits along the way included a quick fuel stop at Dakar in Senegal and a longer visit to the exotic but harrowingly poor and dishevelled city of Abijan on the Ivory Coast.



*Talent in HMS NEWCASTLE*

(Photo: Crown Copyright)



The ship's arrival in the Falklands was delayed by an unplanned diversion to South Georgia to evacuate a casualty from the tiny UK Army garrison in Grytviken. He survived under the tender care of the ship's Medical Officer (though some, including the Chiefs' Mess Bar Manager, assessed the soldier as never having been ill in the first place!). That turned out to be only the first of four round trips up-and-down the very lumpy route to South Georgia during the ship's four lively and varied months on patrol.



*A visitor to the Bridge Wing*

(Photo: Crown Copyright)

The patrols around the islands continued to provide the maritime component of visible and credible joint military deterrence on behalf of the UK Government. More subtly, they also served to reassure the Falkland Islanders of the UK's continuing commitment to their interests, as well as adding a different dimension to island and garrison life. In turn, the Ship's Company enjoyed unexpectedly rich opportunities for recreation, sport and social life ashore - albeit that these were not always enhanced by the late night "bus from hell" that brought liberty men the long miles back from the Mount Pleasant gyms and messes to the relative tranquillity of the ship in Mare Harbour. Although it is never ideal to spend Christmas away from home and loved ones, the family atmosphere on board in some ways compensated for this. Whether it was the unforgettable Christmas lunch lasting 72 hours (enough said), or the excellent Ship's Company pantomime, the festive period highlighted the strength of character in the ship that persisted throughout the deployment.

The ship did break new ground in terms of family harmony. The NO managed to buy up over 30 spare and highly-priced seats on the twice-weekly Tristar flight from UK, to bring spouses out for short visits to the Falklands. This, and other initiatives, helped to bridge the psychological distance, added to physical separation that is so easily bred by lengthy, unglamorous deployments at very long range from home. The Tristar adventure actually did not go too well for one officer's wife. Thanks to a booking error, she was only able to enjoy 12 hours of Falklands bliss with her husband before having to catch the 30-hour return flight to the UK! There was also success with a Tyne Tees TV crew who accompanied a couple of very generous charity auction prize-winners from Newcastle - Brian Reed and Paul Jackson - for a "trip of a lifetime" to ride their affiliated warship in Falklands waters. The resultant 40-minute documentary film provided excellent PR for the ship and for UK Forces in general.

## 1994

The overwhelming view of the Ship's Company was that the Falklands trip had been hard work, often uncomfortable, but hugely rewarding and even enjoyable. Even Leading Steward Brum Endall's goldfish, neatly stowed in the CO's pantry throughout, seemed to survive the repeated defence watches and rough weather with a broad NEWCASTLE smile on his gills! Still, it was a delicious feeling to hand over to HMS NORFOLK on 15 February 1994 and head off at speed back to the UK via the Patagonian Canals, Valparaiso in Chile, Callao (Lima) in Peru, the Panama Canal, Trinidad and the Azores. The Patagonian Canals were a revelation: beautiful but forbiddingly remote and physically hostile. It took 48 hours of constant focus by the Bridge and Ops Room teams to get the ship through safely; HMS BRAZEN, the next RN ship to pass this way a few months later, was not so lucky.

Many of the Ship's Company enjoyed expeditions as the ship transited up the west coast of South America, visiting Machu Pichu (the lost city of the Incas) and Lake Titicaca. Trinidad was memorable, partly for the coincidence of a West Indies - England Test match in Port of Spain. England were comprehensively defeated, but NEWCASTLE's patriotic sailors among the spectators got plenty of air time on TV with their repeated Mexican waves, chants, and at times unfathomable optimism regarding the likely match outcome. Meanwhile, Chief Cook Taff Griffiths joined the annals of BBC radio broadcasting history, in preparing a gigantic and unmistakably British cake for the loquacious and always hungry occupants of the commentary box.



*Alone in the Galley*

(Courtesy of James Cooper)

The return from deployment in April 1994 was followed by several months of low readiness running in UK and European waters, as the ship pursued the usual cyclical pattern of operations and training. The highlight of this period was again an unforgettable home-town visit to the Tyne in early July where the residents of the City once again demonstrated that it is not possible to overestimate the quality of a Tyneside run ashore, especially if your cap tally happens to read HMS NEWCASTLE! The chance was also taken to reaffirm the Ship's acquaintance with Brian Reed and Paul Jackson and the ship also embarked the first female crew-member, in the form of Lieutenant Claire Harriman, the Lynx Flight Observer.