

THE MIDDLE YEARS

The early autumn saw NEWCASTLE heading to the Baltic for a major NATO Partnership for Peace (PIP) exercise, but also taking in excellent visits to Aarhus in Denmark, and Kristiansand and Stavanger in Norway. These were early days for PIP and there were more than a few tricky moments in coordinating business at sea. One of the major curiosities of the exercise was the presence of Russia's then newest frigate, the NEUSTRASHIMY - proud, shiny but oddly reticent until the Ship's Company were able to break down a few barriers with that old and trusted antidote: a few social beers ashore. By the end of the exercise, NEWCASTLE got to know the Russians so well that the Operations Officer saw fit to board them at sea by fast rope from the ship's helicopter. Ably supported by the ship's agile Boarding Team, he took temporary control of their bridge in order to present the Russian Captain with a bottle of Scotch and the makings of afternoon tea!



The ship's Lynx helicopter

(Photo: Crown Copyright)

After a few days back in Portsmouth, during which Commander Keith Winstanley joined, the ship was soon on her way to Rosyth. From there the ship sailed to the dark and stormy waters off Scotland and the Outer Hebrides in late October and November for JMC 943. This large exercise included a staff covered training period to prove the ship's anti-air warfare capability and clear NEWCASTLE for a period of duty as the standby escort to support Naval operations in the Adriatic. It was a busy exercise during which the ship not only fired all of its weapon systems but it also served to highlight the greatly improved effectiveness of the ship's oft criticised 996 radar. After endless problems with this particular radar set, it was a relief to be finally rid of the gremlins and the Ship's Company were justifiably proud of the Very Satisfactory assessment awarded at the end of this work-up period.

A serious incident occurred during the JMC when the embarked sea training staff discovered the Flight Observer's teddy bear (belonging to Lt Claire Harriman) without anti-flash gear during an Actions Stations exercise! The provision of a fetching set of anti-flash clothing rectified this pick-up point, which was included in the final signalled report to Flag Officer Sea Training. Keith Winstanley retains a copy of the subsequent Charge Sheet to this day! The year closed with NEWCASTLE alongside in Portsmouth for a comprehensive Assisted Maintenance Period during late November and December.



Sea Dart firing

(Photo: Crown Copyright)

1995

The first three months of 1995 were dominated by two short notice programme changes, the first to replace another ship for Sea Dart missile firings at Aberporth, and the second to replace HMS BOXER as the close escort for a submarine work-up. The ship also managed activation as Fleet Ready Escort, a single night in Bergen and two very enjoyable operational stand-offs in Liverpool and Swansea. In between the ship completed Exercise Strong Resolve 95, the largest NATO exercise in the first quarter of the year, the highlight of which was undoubtedly operating 80 miles in from the coast in the Fjord waters around Trondheim. At least that allowed NEWCASTLE to operate in calm waters as both the Sea Dart firings, and more significantly the submarine operations out in the deeper waters of the North Atlantic, were both dominated by some appalling weather.

The final period of submarine escort duties required a protracted period down-sea at slow speed. This had the Captain and Bridge team watching the swell and sea state with a very suspicious eye. Just before NEWCASTLE completed the final runs the ship was hit by an enormous wave that crashed against the hangar door, badly damaging it. After a quite ingenious repair the safe down-sea speed was found to be 24 knots. The ship raced down the Irish Sea, picked up a Commanding Officers course for ship handling training, and eventually made it back to Portsmouth for Easter leave.



Reloading the chaff launchers

(Photo: Crown Copyright)

With the ship's second major refit rapidly approaching, the summer term started with an intense eight-day Assisted Maintenance Period (AMP) followed by a fascinating exercise in support of Special Forces training that taxed the Chief Bosun's Mate's seamanship skills. The ship successfully recovered two squadrons of Special Forces, and their seven large inflatable craft, from the water after they were 'dropped' from a Chinook in the Bristol Channel. A little later the ship covertly inserted these rubber-suited men on to "hostile" territory!

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The beginning of May saw NEWCASTLE alongside in Falmouth for the start of the 50th Anniversary celebrations of VE Day. The Ship's Guard led over 200 veterans in a march through the crowded town. The night before entering Falmouth NEWCASTLE had been stood down from her role as standby escort for Adriatic operations. Having promised the Ship's Company a beer if the ship did not deploy to the Adriatic (so convinced was he that they would) Commander Winstanley kept his promise and the Ship's Company all enjoyed a beer at anchor in Falmouth Roads in quite idyllic conditions.

Later that month NEWCASTLE participated in Exercise LINKED SEAS 95, the second major NATO exercise of the year. The exercise took place off the coast of Spain and Portugal and the ship enjoyed an excellent visit to Lisbon to finish exercise preparations. On completion of this exercise NEWCASTLE spent an enjoyable period operating from Gibraltar including many live firing exercises in the Western Mediterranean. With the ship sailing daily from Gibraltar the opportunity was taken to land up to 15% of the Ship's Company each day for rest and recreation.

This hectic pace continued on return to the UK as the ship commenced her pre-refit preparations. The ship de-ammunitioned and achieved a families day at sea prior to sailing for Rosyth in early July.

On the way to Rosyth the ship stopped at Newcastle for an exhausting but exhilarating six-day visit during which many old friends, associates and affiliations visited the ship.



Ship open to visitors on the Tyne

(Photo: Crown Copyright)

The inflatable Newcastle Brown Ale beer bottle (seven foot high!) was handed back to Newcastle brewery for "safe keeping", the Ship's Company exercised their Freedom of the City by marching through a crowded Newcastle city centre, and an excellent final Ship's Company Dance was held using the facilities kindly provided by Newcastle Football Club at St James' Park. A team of Chief Petty Officers had cycled from Portsmouth to greet the ship in Newcastle as a final charity event and the ship handed over a total of some £4,000 pounds to various charities during the visit.

NEWCASTLE finally arrived in Rosyth for her second long refit on 12 July. Within a few days of completing this busy running period the ship lay in a dry dock swathed in scaffolding and wires as the most extensive refit of her career got under way.

HMS NEWCASTLE – *old age*

1996

The second major refit in Rosyth started in early August 1995 and ran through until the end of November 1996. Once again a huge amount of work was undertaken to repair damaged equipment, inspect inaccessible parts of the ship and update weapons, sensors and other equipment. Few compartments were left unaffected.

Throughout the majority of the refit the Ship's Company was reduced to a skeleton crew and only brought up in numbers in time for the post-refit trials in late 1996 with Commander Nick Lambert in command. Even then overall numbers were down to about 180 which left the ship short-handed for many of the post-refit trials and training evolutions. This called for some innovative management techniques, including everything from trawling Naval sick bays, imaginative leave routines and taking Rosyth-based civilian contract cleaners to sea for trials and sea training preparations. The latter involved taking female staff to sea which set a precedent since NEWCASTLE was one of the few Type 42 destroyers that remained a single-sex ship. However, despite the rigours of getting a ship out of Rosyth, the Ship's Company still found time to renew affiliations with the city of Newcastle. In particular, interaction with the Scottish and Newcastle Brewery in the city led to the arrival of a stock of Newcastle Brown Ale bottles with HMS NEWCASTLE labels on them. These and subsequent bottles have been used to great effect over the years to spread the name of the ship, the Royal Navy and the city around the world.

The last few weeks of the refit were difficult for everyone but through vigorous liaison with the dockyard and outright determination, the ship finally put to sea on time. The post-refit trials were conducted in foul winter weather and despite difficulties with defects the ship was still ready to depart Rosyth on 30 November. The departure from Rosyth coincided with the ceremony of returning the Stone of Scone to Edinburgh and NEWCASTLE acted as the Royal Guard ship for HRH The Duke of York. It was a fitting note on which to finish the refit and enhanced the excitement of returning to the ship's base port in Portsmouth.

1997

Further grim determination was required after the Christmas leave period as the ship fought the weather, contractors and a series of equipment defects to complete the remainder of the post-refit sea trials and achieve a successful Fleet Date Inspection at the end of February. Hence, January and February 1997 were furiously busy, exciting but satisfying months. The reward for all the hard work was a cracking run ashore in that favourite place of all sailors - Amsterdam.

NEWCASTLE was the first ship to go through a new five-week Basic Operational Sea Training package in Devonport. The Ship's Company devoured all that the FOST staff could present - air attacks, submarine attacks, fires, floods, famines, disease and pestilence were tackled enthusiastically and most effectively. Five weeks of intensive training concluded with one of the shortest high seas firings on record (range open at 0900, two confirmed hits 10 minutes later, range closed at 0934).



Loading the 4.5" Gun

(Photo: Courtesy of James Cooper)

After Easter Leave the ship sailed south to Lisbon to participate in the 10-day NATO exercise LINKED SEAS. At the end of May the ship sailed for NEWCASTLE with fathers and sons embarked. Wonderful weather and great company made for a special few days culminating in an emotional entry to the Tyne with embarked guests. The ship was rededicated on the quayside on 29 May by her sponsor Lady Rodgers with Admiral Sir Julian Oswald (the first Commanding Officer) in attendance. Exercising the Freedom of the City, Ship Open to Visitors and a Ship's Company Dance were other highlights of

the visit including, as always charity work in the city. A week later the ship sailed for Faslane and the summer JMC. This 10-day exercise completed the process of working the ship up to a high state of readiness for operations.



Charity work in Newcastle

(Photo: Crown copyright)

The autumn term kicked off with a visit to Rotterdam for World Harbour Day followed by a mini deployment to the Iberian Peninsular and West Africa. Visits included Lisbon from where NEWCASTLE sailed as Commander of a large Task Group for Exercise TAPON. After the exercise NEWCASTLE visited Agadir in Morocco where the ship embarked the Ambassador and his wife for passage to Nouakchott in Mauritania - the first Royal Navy ship to visit that nation since Nelson was a lad and it proved to be an outstanding run ashore. After the West Africa visits the ship visited Funchal in Madeira and at Villagarcia in Spain prior to returning to Portsmouth towards the end of October for a Families Day and pre-deployment leave.

NEWCASTLE sailed on 17 November for her next deployment as West Indies Guardship. Early visits in the deployment included Ponta Delgada in the Azores, Hamilton in Bermuda, Roosevelt Roads in Puerto Rico, Montserrat, Tortola and Barbados for Christmas. As well as representing British interests throughout the West Indies the ship was once again tasked to assist in the international counter-drugs effort. Throughout the next seven months the ship spent several periods attempting to intercept drug-trafficking aircraft and boats. The ship also made several visits to the island of Montserrat which had been devastated by a volcanic eruption in 1997.



Plymouth, Montserrat after the eruption

(Photo: Crown Copyright)

1998

Visits in early 1998 included St Lucia, the Dominican Republic, Aruba, St Vincent, Grenada, Trinidad, Antigua, St Kitts, Curacao and Belize. This was one of those wonderful West Indies deployments which included plenty of visits and opportunities to see the Caribbean and participate in a number of sports and activities. But it was not all fun; there was a lot of entertaining and representation and the visits were interspersed with busy periods at sea conducting exercises with local forces and undertaking counter-drug operations. The 12th Commanding Officer, Commander Steve Kenny, joined mid-deployment in April in Jamaica. Counter-drug operations continued to dominate the operational pattern during the latter part of the deployment with stand-offs in Roosevelt Roads, Anguilla, Dominica and Antigua. In early June the ship was able to re-visit the island of Montserrat to provide assistance to the population, many of whom were still coming to terms with the devastation caused by the volcanic eruption.



Volleyball in the West Indies

(Photo: Crown Copyright)

As part of the visit to Montserrat, NEWCASTLE embarked over 100 people of all ages to take them around the island to see for the first time the extent of the destruction the volcano had wrought. It proved an emotional experience. Most had left the capital Plymouth in the middle of the night and had not been allowed to return to the area. As the ship rounded the headland and the city came into view, they were able to appreciate fully the scale of the disaster. Homes lay buried under the ash, the airport was burnt out and years of history and culture lay wrecked. The trip helped some of these unfortunates to come to terms with the fact that there was no going back and gave weight to the commitment to start life anew on the safe side of the island.



Telephone box buried in the ash on the Island of Montserrat

(Photo: Crown Copyright)

After some more periods of counter-drug operations and stand-offs in Tortola and the Bahamas the ship returned to Portsmouth in early July at the end of an eight-month deployment. Once again the cycle turned a full circle and within a few months about 80% of the Ship's Company changed. After the usual round of leave, maintenance and shakedown the ship was back at Devonport for sea training in the late autumn to knock the new team into shape.

As a reward after the work-up the ship paid a visit to Newcastle in mid-December. Once again it was proved that there is no better run-ashore, no warmer people or more kind-hearted citizens than those found in this cosmopolitan, explosive centre of fun. The days were packed to capacity with visitors of all shapes and sizes, sports matches and of course social occasions that go down in the annals of ship history but that are too numerous to mention.

1999

What should have been a quiet Christmas leave period was interrupted by phone calls on Boxing Day to announce that NEWCASTLE was to deploy to the Gulf as escort for INVINCIBLE in three weeks. Reacting with utter professionalism everyone returned from leave and prepared the ship for an open-ended deployment. The ship was enhanced, stored and ready within 10 days. NEWCASTLE and INVINCIBLE sailed on 9 January and arrived in the Gulf at the end of the month.



Close escort to HMS INVINCIBLE in 1999
(Photo: Crown Copyright)

The period in the Gulf was designed to show a strong presence at a time of rising tension. The majority of the time was spent conducting maritime interdiction operations in the northern part of the Gulf. NEWCASTLE's task was to participate in the international effort to prevent the movement of illegal cargos to and from Iraq in support of United Nations resolutions. But it was not all work and the ship enjoyed some time off in Dubai, Bahrain and Kuwait.

As the situation improved in the Gulf in early 1999 it became clear that a new crisis was developing in Kosovo. Shortly after INVINCIBLE and NEWCASTLE left the Gulf in early April at the start of the passage home new orders were received and the ships were diverted to the Adriatic.

This was a difficult period as once again the deployment became open-ended and many onboard had holidays booked, weddings planned and other personal commitments. Nevertheless morale remained high as the ship worked hard in support of the Kosovo campaign. After a month on task the ship was released and was back in Portsmouth for a spectacular homecoming in late May.

The remainder of the year was spent in UK waters undertaking leave, maintenance, trials and training but the reward for the Gulf trip was another visit to Newcastle in August. Once again the visit was enjoyed immensely, the highlight of which was when the Ship's Company exercised their right to march through the City in front of large crowds on a very sunny and beautiful Newcastle day.

2000

In January NEWCASTLE was back at Devonport with Commander Simon Ancona in command to work-up for the next highlight of the ship's career, the Naval Task Group 2000 (NTG 2000) deployment around the world. Early equipment defects, manning gaps and other shortfalls were quickly surmounted and the ship emerged once more from the grasp of FOST slightly bloodied after much hard work, but better off for the experience and having proved the Sea Dart system during a High Seas firing.



Approaching the city backwards!

(Photo: Crown Copyright)

OLD AGE

The reward immediately after the work-up was a visit to Newcastle in March. The ship occupied her favoured berth on Tyne Quay for the final time: the building of the Millennium footbridge has since prevented ships of NEWCASTLE's size taking full advantage of this unique location. As always the hospitality lived up to all expectations with many of the local population clutching sailors to their bosom, so to speak; once again the Ship's Company enjoyed their just desserts after the hard work of the previous weeks.

The return to Portsmouth allowed the ship the opportunity to take fathers and sons (and a daughter) to sea. In addition, members of the Worshipful Company of Upholders, Potential Officer Candidates and Sea Cadets came along. There is something uniquely satisfying, for those with guests, about showing off the ship and the part one plays in fighting or running it. In a few cases the natural reaction to the new experience of being at sea is to be sick or go to sleep. Some took the opportunity to do both yet later still thanked the Ship's Company for the trip. One can only guess at what those individuals would class as a bad day out.



Naval Task Group 2000

(Photo: Crown Copyright)

The priority on return to Portsmouth became the preparations for the NTG 2000 deployment, which began on 2 May. Sailing for such a long trip always generates mixed feelings. On the one hand there is the prospect of visiting far off places and the excitement of uncertainty, but on the other it is never easy to leave family and friends behind. There are always scenes of fond farewells at the quayside just before the ropes are let go and the ship moves away. "Procedure Alpha" made an appropriate statement as the ship nudged into the Solent and the Ship's Company craned their heads in turn to recognise families and the banners held up on Round Tower at the harbour mouth. Some messages were cryptic but others, shall we say, less so.

NEWCASTLE joined the other warships of the task group, CORNWALL and SUTHERLAND, in order to exercise and get to know them. The next afternoon a fire alarm in one of the engine modules threatened the start of the deployment. The problem was quickly dealt with and members of the ME department worked overnight with that slightly maniacal glint in their eyes that comes with a challenge and the engine was back in perfect working order by morning.

Quite a number of the Ship's Company started regular exercise on the upper-deck when the weather began to improve as the ship headed south. A Ship's Company is generally divided into those who love exercise and weight training, those who do it because they feel

they ought to and lastly those who find excuses not to. Commander Simon Ancona's own efforts were designed to ensure the Gibraltar "Rock-Race" was less painful. He recalls, "It's now called the 'rock-run' - presumably to take the potentially risky competitive edge off it. I can't see it myself. In my experience there are the dangerously fit wiry minority with pace-measuring watches and all the right kit who are in no danger of heart failure and are normally met walking back down the rock before most have left the dockyard. Then there are the rest of us, we jog about as fast as a toddler walks and are rightly proud to keep going at all. The thought of getting up before 7 am to run 2.7 miles up a 20-30° gradient did not fill me with glee but once one has challenged oneself to do something there's no choice but to go for it. In the event it didn't prove as bad as I had feared. Around 150 took part, many of whom looked ill and a good many were. I came a respectable 64th". Some of the Ship's Company recorded remarkably good times at around 18 minutes.



Top of the Rock Race

(Photo: Crown Copyright)

On the way across the Mediterranean NEWCASTLE visited Rhodes before meeting up with the Group, now joined by the French Ship ACONIT for the transit of the Suez Canal. The Canal itself never fails to impress. On one side is the arid landscape of the Sinai desert still showing some of the wreckage of the Arab-Israeli wars of the 1970s. The other features the lush fruit farms irrigated by the Nile. The transition experienced during the transit is dramatic. To the north, the weather and flavour is Mediterranean but on popping out into the Gulf of Suez in the south the temperature and humidity rocket and one definitely feels on one's way to the East. Quite apart from anything, no one seems to understand quite how the Gully Gully man, an Egyptian magician, does those things.

Sailing in company meant there was little time for boredom as the ships were constantly involved in training serials and manoeuvres including the vital "Replenishment at Sea", a complicated evolution to take on stores and fuel from the Royal Fleet Auxiliary support ship whilst underway. The ships also conducted a number of "Crosspol" visits where members of the Ship's Company spent a day onboard another ship. Those who visited the new and space-aged looking ACONIT particularly appreciated this. The visitors were given a sumptuous lunch and a very thorough tour during which the French guides were clearly bursting with pride. Simon Ancona recalls that, "it was with a certain amount of guilty satisfaction, when it was time to return to my ageing but trusty Type 42, that I steadfastly stared at my shoes while several French sailors experienced severe difficulty in liberating their seaboard from its space-age cradle deep in the ship's transom".