



*Replenishment at sea* Photo: Crown Copyright)

Once clear of the Red Sea the Group participated in a four-day exercise with American and French forces, simulating likely scenarios in the event of the ships being detached for active service in the Middle East. This provided a useful insight into the escalation of embargo enforcing to peace enforcing operations that may be necessary in that part of the world. That done, the Group headed across the Indian Ocean to Bombay, the Gateway to India. Here Commander Steve Pearson joined as the 14th Commanding Officer. Bombay, now known as Mumbai, is a huge bustling and chaotic Indian city seemingly filled with beggars and ancient vehicles of all sizes and varieties. After the usual rounds of hospitality and defence diplomacy activity the Ship's Company retired ashore to sample the delights of this fascinating city. Most ended up in the Taj Mahal hotel bar or a local restaurant, one of the few places where a beer could be bought in air-conditioned comfort and "Bombay Belly" was not assured.

During the middle part of June the Group transited the Malacca straits for a two-day stop in Singapore for fuel and briefings before NEWCASTLE sailed for Bangkok, an eagerly

awaited port visit. Bangkok offers many things to the sailor, a large ex-pat community, cultural contrasts, markets, unusual local food, and a particularly lively nightlife with plenty of places to go with the shows and colour for which Bangkok is famous. One of the lasting memories is the sheer volume of traffic with taxis cheap and plentiful, but to travel in style requires the use of a tuk-tuk. This is basically a three-wheeled bike powered by a moped engine. The biggest challenge in the use of this type of transport is trying not to fall out whilst hurtling along at breakneck speed. Beside the defence diplomacy activity, sightseeing and shopping in Bangkok, many took the opportunity to see the famous bridge over the River Kwai. The opportunity was also taken to lay a wreath at a cemetery for servicemen who died in the Japanese labour camps of the second World War.

On sailing from Bangkok the ship headed back to Singapore for four days for the final preparations for Exercise Flying Fish, the annual Five Powers Defence Arrangement (FPDA) exercise. On the way the ship took a detour to cross the equator and undergo the "Crossing the Line ceremony". This ancient Naval tradition practised throughout the shipping world ensures that sailors who have not crossed the equator before, and a good few who already have, are brought before King Neptune and his queen to pay homage.

Exercise Flying Fish was a busy two-week exercise split into two parts. Halfway through the ship enjoyed 36 hours anchored off Hadar Island, the setting for the film south Pacific, where the ship's Company relaxed in a very picturesque bay with azure seas, golden beaches and lush jungle that came right down to the beach. A week later at the end of the exercise, the ship headed for a 10-day self-maintenance period in Penang where many families flew out to join members of the ship's Company.

The ship sailed from Penang fully recuperated for a short stopover in Singapore for stores and fuel before continuing on to Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam, perhaps the most eagerly awaited and unusual visit of the deployment. Ho Chi Minh, sometimes still referred to as Saigon, lies more than 80km inland from the south China sea and is connected to the

Mekong Delta by an intricate system of waterways. NEWCASTLE was only the third British warship to visit Vietnam since the 1950s. The main focus of the visit was a Defence Industry Day but there was ample opportunity for the ship's Company to see something of the city and Vietnam. Perhaps the tour that evoked the most interest was the trip to the Cu Chi Tunnels. The tunnels became legendary during the struggle for independence, covering 200km and allowing the Viet Cong to operate only 30km from Saigon unhindered during the fighting and allowing rural life to continue despite the war. From Vietnam it was only a few days at sea with the rest of the Group to the old British colony of Hong Kong. For some this was a return to an old haunt as many onboard had visited before the handover to China in 1997. There was a great deal to fit in over the four days but the ship's Company still managed to travel on the star Ferry to see the breathtaking view of the city at night and to visit the famous night market near Nathan Road. Other spectacular views were available from the Peak which overlooks the city and which is reached by taking an impressively steep tram ride. Many also took the opportunity to get around the island to visit Stanley with its beaches and expansive market and to visit the world-famous Happy Valley stadium.



*Vietnamese friends*

(Photo: Crown Copyright)

From Hong Kong NEWCASTLE continued further north-east into the Yellow Sea exercising with the other ships in the Group before parting company and sailing on alone to the port of Qingdao in China. There the ship was met by a huge parade complete with band and the Chinese proved to be extremely attentive and enthusiastic hosts throughout the stay. A busy visit ensued but 80 of the ship's Company managed to take the opportunity to fly to Beijing City to visit the Great Wall of China, the Summer Palace, Tiananmen square and the Forbidden Palace.

The ship sailed from China to rejoin the Task Group for fuel before passage with CORNWALL to Vladivostock in Russia. The final stop on the Trans-siberian Railway, the city lies some 9,300km east of Moscow and is Russia's major Pacific seaport. In Pusan in South Korea the visit of the previous HMS NEWCASTLE during the Korean War was remembered, although the ship did not shell the city this time. From there the Group visited Tokyo in mid-September. Again official functions and a Defence Industry Day dominated the visit but the Ship's Company were able to see a little of Tokyo and the



*Enjoying Beijing*

(Photo: Crown Copyright)

immediate area. Most were amazed at how vast and sprawling Tokyo is, and many made the journey to see Disneyland, while others took the train over to Mount Fuji and tackled the climb to the summit.

From Tokyo the Group made the 10-day passage to Hawaii. Crossing the dateline gave the ship an extra 24th October but not an extra day's pay! The visit to Pearl Harbour provided an opportunity to interact with the US Navy and to make use of their excellent facilities. Many members of the ship's Company tried their hand at surfing on the north shores of the island, whilst many others tried boogie boarding, snorkelling, or just good old-fashioned sunbathing. Three days of exercises with the US Navy followed the visit to Hawaii. Later the ship conducted the first surface Sea Dart firing for fifteen years against an old hulk before the Group headed to san Diego. While there, a number of the ship's Company ventured inland to Las Vegas and the bright lights of The Casinos and shows. Others headed north to San Francisco and Los Angeles.



*Enjoying Hawaii*

(Photo: Crown Copyright)



The Group sailed from San Diego for the final month of the deployment and headed south towards the Panama Canal conducting Counter Drugs Operations with the US Navy and US Coast Guard. Once through the Canal the Group made the final two visits of the deployment to the Central American countries of Belize and Guatemala before heading home to Portsmouth on 23 November. That brought to an end a Task Group deployment that had visited 30 countries in seven months and which will live long in the memories of all those who participated. The experiences of the deployment were many and varied but the ship's Company proved to be excellent ambassadors for both their country and the city of Newcastle.

## 2001

Back in Portsmouth the ship entered a four-month docking period in late January that updated lots of the ship's systems and equipment. Given that the ship was rapidly approaching her 25th birthday she was found to be in a remarkably well-preserved state, testament to the affection that grips all who serve in her. The time in dock also allowed many of the ship's Company to visit their "real" home in the North East and for the ship's football team a first defeat in over a year. To be fair it was against Newcastle United and against the same reserve eleven that had beaten Manchester United three days earlier so a 10-1 defeat was not as bad as it reads. The other big event was the ship's involvement in the Newcastle Employment Bond, helping those less fortunate into work and training - a tremendous scheme of which the ship was proud to be a part.

The ship was back at sea in late June for sea trials before summer leave and the opportunity to spread the word about the Royal Navy, HMS NEWCASTLE and our adopted home at the International Festival of the Sea in late August. This was a four-day extravaganza, which saw the ship voted most popular warship as a result of impromptu commentaries on displays and drinks for those queuing to tour in the hot summer sun of the bank holiday weekend. Then it was back to sea in the early autumn for the final preparations before another visit to Flag officer Sea Training to conduct Basic Operational Sea Training (BOST). The shakedown included a visit to the Tyne and HMS NEWCASTLE became the first ship to use the new berth at Spillars Wharf. Once again the ship's Company exercised their right to the Freedom of the City by marching through the streets. A return football match saw the ship lose 9-1 but improving. And Bobby Robson certainly learnt something, as Newcastle United went on to reach Europe!

NEWCASTLE sailed south for operational sea training on 11 september, a day none onboard will ever forget, and was the closest warship to London for most of the day with tension high onboard. Then it was down to Devonport for Sea Training, which went surprisingly well given the green Ship's Company and a significant number of manpower gaps.

## 2002

In early February the ship completed her work-up with an excellent performance during Area Continuations Training as part of JMC 021. This took place off the north west corner of Scotland in terrible weather. The highlight was a "gale force" gunnery serial, firing 94 rounds in horrific weather after all the other participants had sought shelter from the 90-knot winds.



*Gunnery during JMC 021*

(Photo: crown Copyright)

## OLD AGE



*Handover of Atlantic duties from HM's MONTROSE*

(Photo: Crown Copyright)

The ship was back in Portsmouth for two weeks before deploying to conduct the Atlantic Patrol Task. Normally two ships cover the Atlantic Patrol duties, one in the Caribbean and the other in the South Atlantic, but in early 2002 only NEWCASTLE was available and the ship set off for a deployment in three stages. The first stage included visits to Sierra Leone, Ghana and Nigeria, which provided very sobering views of life in West Africa. Again the ship's Company were an absolute credit, providing teams that built classrooms and sports facilities for charity projects in each place. Defence diplomacy was again to the fore with exercises with the Navies of the countries as well as training and lectures to soldiers, sailors and airmen. The technical teams onboard did sterling work in a Sierra Leone hospital to get broken equipment working, while the football team did their bit with a 2-2 draw in Nigeria, a game billed as a World Cup warm-up!



*Charity work in Sierra Leone*

(Photo: Crown copyright)

After Africa the ship headed south for her fifth spell in the Falkland Islands - a poignant journey for some onboard as NEWCASTLE's time in the islands coincided with commemorative events to mark the 20th anniversary of the Falklands Conflict. Throughout the two months in the islands wreaths were laid on appropriate days for the ships lost during the conflict. Many of the ship's Company, a good number of whom had not been born at the time of the Conflict, gained a better feel for the various battles by going on battlefield tours. The personal memories of one of the survivors proved quite an experience on an icy cold day at Goose Green.

Early during the period in the Falklands Commander Jeremy Blunden became the fifteenth Commanding Officer, arriving just as the winter snows began to fall. From then on the South Atlantic winter struck with a vengeance. Never particularly rough at sea, the biting cold nonetheless gradually got through to everyone onboard over the following seven weeks in theatre. In late May the ship headed to South Georgia for the highlight of the period in the South Atlantic. Once again the beauty of this harsh island covered in snow stirred everyone onboard. Parties got ashore on Bird Island, in Grytviken and in Stromness where many enjoyed some impromptu winter sports or just enjoyed exploring the old whaling stations. Other highlights included taking the ship to within a few yards of the face of two large glaciers and going close to an iceberg aground in 600 feet of water.



South Georgia 2002

(Photo: Crown Copyright)

Back in the Falkland Islands the opportunity was taken for some mid-deployment maintenance and to undertake a series of exercises with the Army and Air Force. On 14 June the ship went alongside in Stanley for the 20th Anniversary of the end of the Falklands Conflict and paraded a Guard in a foot of snow for the ceremony. A few days later the ship turned her bows away from the cold and headed north to the third part of the deployment, Counter-Drug Operations in the Caribbean.

On the way north the ship enjoyed some excellent visits to South America. A 24-hour stop in Montevideo for essential stores provided a wonderful opportunity to unwind after the Falklands and many enjoyed sitting outside in the warmth once more. From there the ship headed north to Rio de Janeiro for a Defence Industry demonstration and an opportunity to work with the Brazilian Navy. The visit coincided with the World Cup Final and with Brazil, the eventual champions the atmosphere in the city was electric as the Ship's Company explored the delights of the city, including Copacabana and Ipanema beaches, Sugar Loaf Mountain and the statue of Christ atop Corcovado. A week later the ship was in Fortaleza, another Brazilian city, for an overnight refuelling visit that provided a second excellent opportunity to sample the wonders and delights of Brazil.



## OLD AGE

In late July after a very relaxing four-day visit to Barbados the ship started a short period of Counter-Drug Operations (CD Ops) on the south-eastern edge of the Caribbean. Operating in a very small area during only 17 days at sea, the ship was involved in six incidents that resulted in two drug busts. This was an exciting time for the ship's Company, some of whom had been involved in CD Ops before but without success. Two days out from Barbados the ship was working with an aircraft when an exchange of drugs was seen. NEWCASTLE was not far away and was quickly on the scene intercepting a small fishing vessel and her cargo of 225kg of marijuana.

The next afternoon, while still dealing with the paperwork following the first incident, the ship sailed at high speed to intercept a multi-engined speed boat carrying drugs up from the coast of south America. An exciting chase followed before the boat was finally brought to a stop just after dark. sadly in the darkness the boat ditched her cargo of drugs overboard without being spotted and the ship had to let it go. However, the boat had earlier been spotted close to a yacht and at first light the next morning NEWCASTLE stopped and detained the yacht and recovered 575kg of cocaine valued at £50 million.



*£50 million pounds worth of cocaine*

(Photo: Crown Copyright)

A few days later the ship played detective as she sought to find a merchant vessel suspected of carrying a multi-tonne load of cocaine. For four days NEWCASTLE patrolled a choke point looking for the ship before finally finding it. It turned out to be quite a large merchant vessel and despite having no cargo onboard it took a further four days to board and search it, sadly without result.

After all the hard work and success the ship enjoyed a three-day stand-off in St Lucia where the ship's Company enjoyed relaxing on the beach and soaking up the Caribbean atmosphere. From there the ship completed a further two days of CD Ops before heading to Puerto Rico to de-brief the operations and to start the long passage home across the Atlantic to arrive back in Portsmouth on 23 August.

## OLD AGE

The ship's programme for the rest of 2002 was badly affected by the requirement to supply sailors to man Green Goddess fire engines to provide emergency cover during the Fire Brigade Union pay dispute. During the strikes of 2002 and early 2003, sailors from NEWCASTLE manned temporary fire stations throughout Berkshire and in West Sussex and were involved in several fire-fighting and life-saving operations. Back onboard the



*Boarding operations in the Caribbean*

(Photo: Crown Copyright)

enforced time alongside allowed those that remained time to address some of the little jobs that never quite seem to get done. At the time of writing in late February 2003, the ship, despite her age, is in remarkably good condition. The ship's Company are awaiting the result of the Fire Brigade Union dispute before the ship returns to sea for the next stage of her career, which includes her 25th Birthday Party in the city of her birth - Newcastle.



*Fighting Fires in 2002*

(Photo: Crown Copyright)



## Affiliations

The link between any ship and its adopted city is special but in NEWCASTLE's case this is doubly so since the ship was built on the Tyne and the affiliation is with the city of her birth. From a very early stage while the ship was still building, strong contacts were established with organisations and businesses, links which have survived to this day.

Shortly after the ship commissioned in 1978, NEWCASTLE returned to the city to be granted the Freedom of the City and has continued to visit around every eighteen months. With the Freedom of the City came the right to march through the streets, a privilege the ship's Company have exercised on many occasions. As a result the people of Newcastle have regularly seen the sailors from "their" ship proudly marching through the streets. Councillor Mary Carr, a former Lord Mayor, found the ceremony of inspecting the guard and taking the salute in full ceremonial regalia to be a particularly poignant event as she took the salute in 2001, yards from where her working life began selling flowers in the city centre.



*The Brown Ale bottle at the Masthead*

(Photo: Crown Copyright)

The Scottish and Newcastle brewery has been as important to the ship as it has to the city and regular contact has been maintained. At an early stage the brewery presented the ship with a large Newcastle Brown Ale flag which is flown at sea when the ship replenishes from a Tanker. The ship also has a huge inflatable Brown Ale bottle, which is regularly raised to

## AFFILIATIONS

the top of the mast as the ship goes in and out of harbour. A number of commemorative bottles of Brown Ale with the ship's crest on the label are held onboard and presented to appropriate recipients.



*Never more happy than when home on the Tyne*

(Photo: Crow, Copyright)

In 1991 the ship was one of the first organisations to invest in a Newcastle Employment Bond to help the long-term unemployed back to work. Other links with a number of companies based in Newcastle including Barbour, Northern Rock and Accenture who have all helped promote the city around the world. The ship also has a black and white awning to visibly display Newcastle United's colours and the ship's football team wear a club strip to help promote both the city and the Royal Navy.

Sporting links have always been important and the liaison developed with Newcastle United has seen fixtures in recent times for the sailors against the reserve side. Sir Bobby Robson has been spotted looking for talent but the 10-1

and 9-1 victories for the Magpies in recent years has meant no budding new stars were spirited away from the ship. More visual links were established at the local racecourse with the introduction of the HMS NEWCASTLE Handicap Stakes in 2001. The Greyhound track at Brough Park also hosts the "Geordie Gunboat Stakes" when the ship is in town.

More important to the future are the close links established with five Sea Cadet units and two Combined Cadet Force units around the city. sailors from the ship regularly visit the units to give presentations to the youngsters and to witness various activities. Links with children have always been important to the ship and sailors from NEWCASTLE are often involved in charity work for underprivileged and sick children around the world.

In 2000 the ship took part in the Royal Navy Schools Link Up project. The idea was for schools in the UK to follow a Royal Navy Ship on a deployment to learn about life in the Royal Navy and in the countries visited. Many schools followed NEWCASTLE'S movements on the Ship's web page as she took part in the Naval Task Group deployment that year, which visited many countries and circumnavigated the globe. The site was so effective that the Ship's Company regularly found people in countries they were visiting who had already seen the web page before arrival and were keen to be included. It was even reported that senior Naval officers were following the deployment on the Internet rather than through the normal channels!



*Friends in Newcastle*

(Photo: crown Copyright)