

THE SURRENDER OF THE GERMAN HIGH SEAS FLEET

An address by

THE HON LORD CAMERON, DSC, LL.D,
Senator of the College of Justice,

to the Ship's Company of HMS Claverhouse, Forth Division RNR
on Thursday, 21st November, 1968
on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of
the Surrender

INTRODUCTION:

In the late summer of 1968 the Sea Tender of the Forth Division RNR, HMS KILLIECRANKIE, took part in a Western Fleet Review in the Firth of Forth. On the rehearsal day (when a large number of frigates, coastal minesweepers, two County Class DLGs and a Commando Carrier were present) Captain A. H. Watson, DSC, VRD, RNR posed the question - "When was there last such a formal gathering of warships in the Firth of Forth?" and the answer was "on Thursday 21st November 1918, the occasion of the Surrender of the German High Seas Fleet."

He suggested that the Division should mark this jubilee and as a result a reasonable amount of material was gathered together and a small exhibition was arranged within HMS Claverhouse, a leaflet was produced on the Surrender, and the Wardroom arranged a "Surrender Ball" on Friday 22nd November 1968.

One officer of the Division happened to be walking down the Mound from the Parliament House with Lord Cameron, and mentioned these activities to him. Lord Cameron then described the surrender to him. As a result Captain Watson invited Lord Cameron to address the Ship's Company on the date of the 50th Anniversary of the Surrender, Thursday, 21st November 1968.

The address was recorded on tape, and the text of the address which follows is an edited version of that recording. The reader is asked to bear in mind that it was essentially the spoken word.

Lord Cameron was at the time of the surrender a Midshipman RNVR in the destroyer HMS WINDSOR. Amongst those invited to the talk were a retired officer, Commander(S) F. S. Mycroft, RD, RNR, and Mrs. Mycroft. Commander Mycroft, in November, 1918 was a Paymaster Lieutenant RNR in the Battle Cruiser HMS LION and Mrs. Mycroft, in November 1918, was serving as an Ordinary rating in the WRNS, on the books of HMS CRESCENT, in Rosyth. At the time she was employed as a Writer in the Captain's Office of the 2nd Submarine Flotilla (K Class). Captain SM2 was borne in the destroyer HMS ITHURIEL, and he took two of his WRNS and some wives to sea on Surrender Day, instructing them to keep out of sight of the Flagship.

ITHURIEL and the 2nd Submarine Flotilla steamed as far out as the May Island, and so Mrs. Mycroft, being one of the WRNS on board, witnessed part of the Surrender.

The transcription of the tape was made some time after the address.

H.M.S. CLAVERHOUSE - THURSDAY, 21st November, 1968

Captain Watson:

As you are all aware, today is the 50th anniversary of the surrender of the German High Seas Fleet. Admiral Sir David Beatty was Commander-in-Chief of the Grand Fleet and this surrender took place in this very river which lies in front of this building here, and I thought that it was very fitting that we should on this occasion not let this event pass by us and this is why we first of all are having a party tomorrow night in the Wardroom. But after we had made those arrangements it was brought to my notice that there was a very eminent gentleman in this City of ours, Edinburgh, who was present on this occasion, Lord Cameron. He served in both World Wars, in the first one as a very Junior Officer, naturally so, and in the second one as a more senior one, but he was still a very active officer serving in very active boats in the Second War and we are very privileged tonight to have Lord Cameron with us down here, and he is going to describe this event as he saw it, to us.

Lord Cameron:

Captain Watson, Ladies and Gentlemen,

As Captain Watson said, I was a very junior person at the time of the surrender, in fact the lowest created Naval thing a Midshipman RNVR, but before I talk to you about any details of the surrender of the High Seas Fleet, there are two points I want to make.

It is very often said that the High Seas Fleet surrendered because Germany collapsed through pressure upon her armies. That's not the truth, the truth of the fact is that the High Seas Fleet surrendered as part of the Armistice terms because, when the High Seas Fleet was ordered out to face the Grand Fleet, the Ships Companies mutinied - they had faced the Grand Fleet once and they weren't going to do it a second time - and indeed in many ways it was lucky for them they didn't because the battle fleet of November 1918 was a very much more deadly instrument than the battle fleet of 1916.

The defects in the ships, which were numerous, had been largely corrected, gunnery in the fleet was of an extremely high standard - I'll mention a little episode in a moment - and the bullets were very different from those which broke up on impact on the armour of the German battleships and battlecruisers in May, 1916. The shells we had then would have pierced their armour and burst inside, which was what their shells did on us, with disastrous results - and high explosives make no difference between the colours worn by the ships - they have the same effect.

It was the pressure of the Grand Fleet and of the Royal Navy as a whole which strangled Germany, the unseen pressure, the same kind of pressure as, in the words of an American Admiral, stood between the Grand Army of France and the dominion of the world: Mahan referred in his "Influence of Sea Power on History" to "those storm beaten ships on which the Grand Army never looked". Well, "those storm beaten ships" were there in 1914 to 1918 and the German Army never looked on them, but they stood between the German Armies and the dominion of the world. As Winston Churchill said about Jellicoe, and he had

no great love of Jellicoe, “he was the one man who could lose the war in an afternoon”, and sometimes Winston hit the nail very heavily on the head.

It was perhaps appropriate that it was on a very misty day when the full Fleet lines could not be seen from end to end that the last scene in this naval drama was played out in these very waters. Now it is not for me to endeavour to give you a historian’s tale of what happened, but I would like to turn back fifty years tonight to Aberlady Bay and the wardroom of one of the most modern destroyers of that time - HMS WINDSOR.

The night before, we got down from the pens at Port Edgar, anchored in Aberlady Bay and we proceeded with our whole flotilla at 2 o’clock in the morning - a very unpleasant time to hear “special duty men to stations” piped, but anyway we did. A cold November morning.

Now in those days, a flotilla of destroyers didn’t consist of eight boats, it was made up of twenty-four destroyers with a cruiser as our leader, the CHAMPION. Our flotilla was a screening flotilla and was looked upon by Commander Mycroft, whom I am very happy to see here tonight.

He was one of those superior beings who lived in a great ship, the LION and we screened the Battlecruiser Force. Therefore, it was of particular interest to our flotilla to know that we were going to be the first to meet the ships that were to surrender because in the Grand Fleet Battle Orders not only were we to screen, in ordinary cruising formation, the Battlecruiser Force, we were their battle screen and when contact was made between the main fleets our job was to make torpedo attacks on the head of the High Seas Fleet, which seemed a pretty reckless exercise.

So it was naturally a matter of considerable interest to have a chance of seeing them. I said to you just now that we were about twenty-four boats in the flotilla all of the most —then the most modern destroyers - the “Vs” and “Ws”, which when they came out were the finest destroyers that we ever built, and I think in many ways they still retain that pride of place. Although they got old, they still served, and those that survived did yeoman service, in the last war, and if I may interpose another personal note, and after all this is merely personal recollections, I was very happy to see - when one evening in May 1940 I happened to get into Dover harbour — to see the familiar silhouette of HMS WINDSOR doing her stuff very gallantly in the Dunkirk evacuation.

Well I said we had the “Vs” and “Ws” in the flotilla and I think that we had more of these than any other of the Grand Fleet flotillas, the four big ones, the 11th, 12th, 14th and 15th which were screening flotillas of the Battle Squadrons. They were manned by the usual mixture of ‘hostility only’ ratings and ‘active service’, but there were very very few RNVR officers serving in fleet destroyers.

We carried a snottie, myself, a surgeon probationer who was a makey-do doctor, a medical student dished up as a doctor, and a very nice chap, but he was not yet a frightfully good doctor. The rest were all ‘active service’. The Captains, well destroyer captains of that generation which produced the great characters of the destroyer world whose exploits habits and characteristics are still remembered in the fleet and some of them were men who earned great distinction later.

Our divisional leader in WOLFOUND was Commander John Cronyn Tovey, DSO, who subsequently became Lord Tovey, Commander-in-Chief, Home Fleet in KGV when "Bismarck" was sunk.

The "Ocean Swell" alias Jack Ramsay, commanded the VENDETTA. E.C.O. Thomson commanded the VERDUN, he became Flag Officer up here, and Jack Ramsay was for most of the war Commander-in-Chief, Rosyth.

I don't know if you know how Tovey got his DSO, but it is a story worth remembering. He was Captain of the ONSLOW also of the 13th flotilla at the battle of Jutland and during the daylight battle she got badly hit in the engine room. Her speed was reduced to 10 knots, which was not frightfully fast for a destroyer even in those days, and she was crippled at the time of the run to the North - you remember the battlecruisers had to turn when the High Seas Fleet came on the scene — she was crippled then and so she carried on and managed to put a torpedo into the SEYDLITZ, at 10 knots, but not only so, she got away, and Tovey got the DSO for that.

I mentioned the VERDUN just now because thereby hangs a little tale. When the late King George V came to inspect the fleet shortly before the Surrender, we titivated ourselves up, thinking that we were going to take the King round, or at least escort him. He was going to go in the OAK which was the Commander-in-Chief's "doggie" destroyer, a beautiful little ship. We were called WINDSOR and we thought after all, he had taken the name of Windsor, we were going to do something about it, so I have a personal reason for remembering this.

We were all busy painting the ship, from I was going to say, the Captain upwards or downwards including the Midshipman RNVR and I was a clumsy young clown and there was a nice large bucket of good old naval crab fat on the quarterdeck and my foot came into collision with it and the whole shooting match went on the deck. I will not tell you what the Petty Officer in charge of the Quarterdeck said about RNVR Midshipmen. It was very much to the point. However, His Majesty, with a lack of taste we reprehended, but with courtesy to our allies, chose the VERDUN and she took him round.

Well, to come back to the events of the 21st, the weather was very thick but it had been very much thicker in the early parts of November and the fleet was decimated with Spanish flu. Commander Mycroft will remember that epidemic of Spanish flu. We had very good cause to remember it because WINDSOR had done a short refit at Greenock. All along we had a thing called fimbriated turbine which is an internal disease that turbines occasionally suffer from, which took us along to the shipyard where we had been built and we sailed for Rosyth or Port Edgar at midnight on 11th November, 1918 and I can assure you that the only sober people in the Burgh of Greenock were the Ships Company of HMS WINDSOR.

The rest were hopelessly drunk - I have never seen anything like it in my life. Well, anyway, we came round with a borrowed captain who had put a destroyer on the putty on the Irish coast, who was a bit nervous, and got into Port Edgar more by good luck and the mercy of God than anything else. You couldn't see your hand in front of you. First of all you had a collection of ships lying off Burntisland, then you had the American battleships, the 6th

Battle Squadron, then you had the 5th Battle Squadron, the four QEs, then you had the Battlecruiser Force, and you had to thread your way up through this collection of hearties in a thick fog, which wasn't really much fun, but the Americans had the most lovely bells.

Have you ever heard the American's battleship bell? It's a very delightful tone, so we knew we were near the Americans when we heard the bell, they weren't church bells. I was very glad to see two of them in the last war doing their stuff. NEW YORK and TEXAS turned up during "Overlord" and were having a good time shelling the Germans on the French coast - a very inspiring spectacle.

Luckily the day itself, the 21st, although it was misty, was not a day of thick fog, but it was by no means clear and the surrender exercise came at the end of a month of increasing flaps. Even in the fleet, even amongst the most junior people, it was known that there was a large size chance that the High Seas Fleet would come out for a last fling and we expected something to happen in October.

One forenoon, indeed, we thought the balloon had gone up because, as you know, most operations began by the fleet sailing in the darkness, and one forenoon LION was suddenly seen to be belching smoke out of her funnels which quite obviously indicated that she was raising steam in a hurry. We were at two hours' notice for steam at Port Edgar, everybody quite happy, shore parties landed doing various things, and we got orders to raise steam to proceed to sea with all dispatch, which we did.

It was blowing hard from the east, a filthy day, but the worst of it was that our No. 1 funnel - the little one that sticks up you know in the "Vs" and "Ws" - was covered with red lead, as we had got it rather battered and messed about in some exercise and the Captain decided to paint it as we'd the time to do it, but he had also been Captain of a destroyer - the ARIEL - in the 1st Flotilla at Jutland and the SEYDLITZ happened to have the misfortune to have a certain amount of red lead on her after funnel. It was one of the few things that could be seen through the mist and the SEYDLITZ got a deuce of a pasting. No doubt because her funnel was easily spotted. I think I'm right in that.

Well, we got a couple of hands on stagings slung up the funnel putting on paint. Of course the funnel had got very hot, they got very uncomfortable, and as fast as the paint went on, it got burnt off, so that was the end of that little episode. Luckily nothing happened and we all came back to harbour and the next morning the Grand Fleet turned up from Scapa and there it was, the Germans didn't know it was going to be that way.

Well, to come back to the surrender, we weighed at two in the morning and went to action stations, at about six in the morning. We were leading flotilla, we weren't screening the battle cruisers, we were spread out, on the operation orders, as a look out screen and we were due to pick up the big ships - German big ships - 50 miles due east of May Island at 8 o'clock in the morning. I can still remember standing on the Bridge munching a large fat sandwich and drinking some very sweet tea, just about 8 o'clock and there through the mist was CARDIFF coming along at 12 knots. We'd made a perfect rendezvous, a perfect rendezvous and here we were, CHAMPION ahead of us and the flotilla arranged in column of divisions, four ships in each division, in single line ahead. We were number two in our

division, we were second boat to WOLFHOUND and then, through the mist came this amazing spectacle. First of all you got the loom of some smoke and then the first of these big ships. One of the most wonderful things in the world because you realized that whatever was going to happen, this was one of the greatest naval occasions that ever occurred. Either because of the size of the forces which I won't say engaged but employed or for the quality of the event itself.

They were not in very good station. They were supposed to be three cables apart, the big ships, but there they were SEYDLITZ, DERFLINGER, VON DER TANN, MOLTKE, the whole lot of them, whose silhouettes one knew like the back of one's hand, magnificent looking ships, real warships, very low silhouette, turrets very well arranged, perfect engines of war, but they were dirty. They were filthy, the ships looked unkempt of course, they were making a vast amount of smoke, they probably had a scratch crew of stokers and the fires hadn't been properly drawn and produced a lot of smoke.

But then after them came the battleships, a magnificent collection of battleships, their 3rd Battle Squadron, a really fine lot, headed by the BADEN, which was an equivalent, more or less, to our "QEs" which were, of their kind, the finest ships ever built and the most beautiful ships that you ever saw, and then we counted the light cruisers, there were seven of them but only forty-nine destroyers. There should have been fifty but there were just forty nine like the little nigger boys. One had struck a mine on the way across and got itself sunk, which was very silly of it.

That was the pageant that passed by so you can imagine what it looked like. We were steaming 12 knots easterly, this procession of ships looming up from the mist then disappearing westwards into the mist. As the day got clearer you could see more, carrying on, the German ensign still hoisted, and all the British ships had mast head ensigns, battle ensigns, hoisted as well, everybody at action stations, guns trained fore and aft.

All very quiet, not a sound, because, of course, you couldn't hear anything from these ships but this line going through the mist, through the mist, ship after ship disappearing and then after the last ship, we swung around sixteen points, took up station, and in effect a rearguard, rather like taking this little lot into custody.

But there we were, we were all very, very happy. And then the day began to get a bit better and there were fitful glimpses of the sun, and as the sun broke the mist from time to time it must have been rather like Jutland in some respects. You could see a line of British ships, and you knew them again like the back of your hand, this marvellous spectacle which will never be seen again, never were so many great battleships in formation together, never were so many destroyers gathered together in one force, this enormous Armada, the two columns of British and American ships, escorting the Germans into harbour.

So the day went on, the afternoon came, we passed the battle cruisers, we could still see LION, TIGER, PRINCESS ROYAL, we passed the RENOWN, then the old rather doubtfuls, AUSTRALIA and NEW ZEALAND for example and then the first of the aircraft carriers FURIOUS.

Then the last remnants of the old armoured cruisers, a rather curious collection. The

armoured cruiser was a type of ship which was as useless in its way as the battlecruiser was. They were really useless ships in the line of battle because they were not designed for it, although people thought they were.

The armoured cruiser was disappearing from the face of the earth and the aircraft carrier was going to take the place of these majestic capital ships at the end of the first war.

A very curious conversion she was too; she was one of the three ships built by Fisher to act as very fast cruisers, 33 knots, no protection at all, she was part of his Baltic fleet, and she was armed with two 18" guns in single turrets, and I don't think they ever dared fire the things. Her sisters the COURAGEOUS and GLORIOUS and as you know were converted into aircraft carriers and both came to sticky ends in the last war. GLORIOUS got scuppered by the SCHARNHORST and GNEISENAU and COURAGEOUS got torpedoed in the Channel. They were usually known as the "Careful" and the "Cautious" because though they formed the 1st Cruiser Squadron they were so utterly useless that they were a danger to themselves and to anybody else, and they were never allowed to go too close to anybody that might hit them hard. Well, that was - I won't say the end of a perfect day - but we came back to harbour and broke off. The various squadrons, rather like a review, moved back to their anchorages, the German heavy ships went to Methil Bay for the night, the destroyers into Aberlady Bay under guard, and there we were.

The Commander-in-Chief in the QUEEN ELIZABETH passed up the lines, we weren't passed by him we saw her in the distance, and he had a great day as she was cheered by ship after ship and she went to her flagship's buoy. And then a signal was made from the Commander-in-Chief saying that the German flag would be hauled down at sunset and would not be hoisted without permission. Then he made a general signal to the fleet saying that it was his intention to hold a service at 6 o'clock that evening aboard the flagship and it was for anybody else who liked to follow suit, but I think that in every ship there was some small service of thanksgiving for this - in the Cromwellian phrase - "this crowning mercy".

In a sense it was an anticlimax, because the expectation had been that before the end came, there would be a final and ultimate naval clash in the North Sea, the result of which was certain, given anything like decent visibility, and, if one may judge from what one saw in those days of the gunnery of the fleet, it would have been certain.

I remember on one occasion, shortly before this happened, we happened to be screening one of the "R" class battleships which then formed part of the 1st Battle Squadron and a practice shoot was frequently carried out with full calibre, with a throw off, a full calibre shoot, throwing off the deflection a bit extra and the game was that while a ship should disappear 20 or 30 miles away and come up at high speed on an unknown bearing, unknown position, and one squadron would be formed up into a line ahead and would open up.

Well, we were screening and she was sailing at about 16/17 knots, and the 1st Battle Squadron hove up over the horizon about 20,000 yards and off came the first salvo, four gun salvo, of 15" bricks and they landed right in her wake and move as she would, they kept on and I thought to myself, well when the day does come, given a good bit of visibility, Von Hipper is going to have his work cut out to get home.

Well, that is a personal recollection of a very great day and one that, even fifty years on, I can still recollect very vividly and I have no doubt that everybody else who was there on that day will not forget it. The ships have changed, there are no great fleets who move one to admiration, but one thing, I think is pretty certain, that we still have got the same kind of idea about what we want the fleet to be, and I am pretty certain that we have got the same men to man the fleet even with the enormous technical changes which have taken place over the last fifty years, and the enormous change of demand of skills that has resulted, but let me just say one thing.

Whatever may be the technical advance and the technical equipment, there will always be a demand for seamen, and you can't be seamen by being in harbour. Lord St. Vincent once said that men and ships rot in harbour. One other thing is true, you can't learn the art of naval warfare in harbour, and in those days you didn't get very much harbour time.

Well it was a great privilege to have been there, it was a great privilege to come here tonight and to tell you something about the recollections of a very junior wart on a very great occasion and may I just thank you Captain Watson for the invitation and you Ladies and Gentlemen for being so kind as to listen with such attention as you have done.

