

Rear Admiral S L McArdle CB, GM, MVO

It doesn't take much to set me on the track of digging up something interesting for the Historic Contribution topic.

I was recently up at Kew, transcribing some more ship's logs, in this case the only log available for 1956; September. What made it interesting in part, was that RELENTLESS had decommissioned in May 1955 in Faslane but between the 1st and 24th September 1956, RELENTLESS was commissioned and underwent a series of trials and calibrations before once more being decommissioned, I guess, back into Category One Reserve.

Reading through the log, I noticed the name of the Navigating Officer, Lt R C Cleff who signed the Log, and the name of the Commanding Officer, S L McArdle. Both signatures were not too easy to read but after Googling a few variations the latter name proved to be correct.

Stanley Lawrence McArdle was born on 27 September 1922 in Lochmaben, Dumfriesshire. He was the son of a Royal Marines Colour Sergeant and was educated at the Royal Hospital School, Holbrook near Ipswich. He joined the Royal Navy in 1938 as a Boy Seaman 2nd Class and saw service in WW2 as a torpedoman. In 1945 he was the only successful candidate at a Fleetboard for promotion to Officer.

There is scant information on his clamber up the promotional ladder but I guess that in 1956, when commanding RELENTLESS for those few weeks, "S L McArdle" was probably either a Lieutenant Commander or a Commander. In 1965 he commanded the MOHAWK and in 1969, the GLAMORGAN. Between April 1970 and December 1971, he was a Captain serving as the Director of Training & Staff Duties at the MOD and sometime later, May 1973 to August 1975, he was Flag Officer Portsmouth in the rank of Rear Admiral.

Rear Admiral McArdle did not get a knighthood, but amongst his decorations were CB (Companion of the Order of the Bath), GM (George Medal) and MVO (Member of the Royal Victorian Order). Whilst the CB is a 'not to be sniffed at' award, the MVO is interesting in that he received it for training and commanding the Naval Guard for the funeral of King George VI.

And so we can add another Flag Officer to the impressive list of COs of Relentless.

However, that isn't the story because this brings us on to his award of the George Medal - the highest ranking medal for "acts of great bravery" in a non-war environment - which Lt Cdr McArdle received whilst serving on HMS Contest in 1953, probably as the 1st Lieut.

In 1953, the MV "Princess Victoria" was a 2,700 ton RORO ferry, operated by British Rail on the Stranraer to Larne route across that 20 mile stretch which separates Scotland from Northern Ireland, the North Channel.

In late January of 1953, a massive windstorm swept across Europe, causing the great North Sea Flood, and there were 531 deaths across Britain. This spate of bad weather led to many distress calls from smaller ships at sea and in the north Irish Sea and on the west coast of Scotland, the maritime support services, coastguards, lifeboats, RAF Rescue and indeed the RN were hard pressed to provide help to everyone.

It was in just such a situation that the MV Princess Victoria sailed from Stranraer for the short hop across the channel. The ferry left Stranraer at 0745 with 44 tons of cargo, 128 passengers and a crew of 51 but shortly after clearing the shelter of land, spray was seen to be coming over the stern doors.

In a what could have been a prelude to the 1987 "Herald of Free Enterprise" disaster, a 'guillotine' door had not been lowered which provided protection for the stern doors. It apparently took too long to lower and raise.

As the ship turned west, the stern doors were exposed to the worst of the storm and when they became damaged they were unable to close properly and the guillotine door was then not able to be deployed. The car deck was soon swamped and the ship developed a list to starboard. With the ship barely maintaining steerage way in an attempt to protect the stern from the worst of the weather the Captain radioed for assistance but by 1030 the list was exaggerated by shifting cargo and an SOS was sent.

The Portpatrick and the Donaghadee Lifeboats and the destroyer 'Contest' were despatched to the area and four small merchant vessels left the shelter of Belfast Lough to provide some assistance. Contest' had been despatched from Rothesay at 1109 and although she made 31 knots for a while, resultant damage to the superstructure forced them down to 18 knots.

Help was not immediately forthcoming as the reported SOS position which put the ferry off Stranraer was out by a significant amount, the ship being much closer to Northern Ireland than thought. However, once spotted by an RAF Hastings, the rescue 'flotilla' was directed to them. Unfortunately, the order to abandon had been made and boats had already been lowered.

The merchant vessels arrived before the Lifeboats and the 'Contest' but the sea was too rough for them to rescue the ferry's boats and all they could do was attempt to keep them in their lee to provide shelter. It was this chaotic scene that greeted the Donaghadee lifeboat and 'Contest' when they arrived.

Sadly, I can't find any more information as to the rescue itself but as the whole story was later unfolded, of the 179 people on board the 'Princess Victoria', there were only 40 survivors. Amongst those lost were the Deputy PM of Northern Ireland and the MP for North Down, but what shocked many people was that amongst the survivors there was not one single woman or child. Eyewitnesses reported seeing a lifeboat containing at least some of the women and children being smashed against the side of the ferry by the huge waves.

If you Google "MV Princess Victoria" you will find more information.

So, what did Lt Cdr McArdle do to earn his George Medal? The citation reads that:

Lieutenant Commander Stanley Lawrence McArdle and Chief Petty Officer Wilfred Warren of HMS Contest were both awarded the George Medal for diving into the water to help survivors.

In retirement, Rear Admiral Stanley Lawrence McArdle was a director of British Bus and Endless Holdings, a Justice of the Peace and a commissioner of taxes as well as a governor of Godolphin School in Salisbury.

He died on the 4th December 2007, aged 85.

Let's hear it for Stan...

As a further matter of interest, if you have been looking through the Ship's Logs or read the On This Day posts, you will know that RELENTLESS was part of the 3rd Training Squadron based in Londonderry. At that time the squadron provided a Duty Emergency Destroyer on a daily basis. During the Court of Inquiry into the disaster, it was noted by the court that the duty destroyer, TENACIOUS, was unable to put to sea as too many men were on shore leave. As a consequence, the duty destroyer was subsequently stationed at the mouth of Lough Foyle to be better able to provide assistance.

That could well have been RELENTLESS...

To further twist the story though, the Wikipedia entry has this personal testimonial from one Douglas Mumford:

"As a serving member on board HMS Tenacious on that day, the report that we did not sail due to lack of men is not as I remember it. I was the Leading Telegraphist on board HMS Tenacious and returned on board, that morning, to find the ship in readiness to go to sea. We were to search for a fishing vessel which was in distress off the North of Scotland. Just before actually sailing, the SOS from MV Princess Victoria was received on 500 K/cs and our sailing was delayed. In great frustration, we read all the signals concerning the Princess. Our own direction-finding equipment clearly showed that she was not lying just off Stranraer but was approaching the coast of N Ireland. We were never allowed to leave harbour until well after the Princess went down. We were then sent on a search for the fishing vessel. One very rough passage north, a very quick and fruitless search and return to Londonderry with considerable damage to our upper deck structures, due to the severe weather"

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