



remembrance ni

NI links with costliest event in Royal New Zealand Navy's history

Early in 1941, the New Zealand Government responded to the Admiralty's request for more sailors to man the increasing number of ships being brought into war service. It was intended



The Light Cruiser HMS Neptune, only one man survived out of her entire complement when she came to grief in a minefield.

to form a New Zealand crew for an additional cruiser; HMS Neptune had been approved for this purpose. She had been expected to leave the United Kingdom for New Zealand in May, but instead she was attached to the Seventh Cruiser Squadron in the Mediterranean because of the heavy loss of cruisers suffered during the Crete campaign.



HMS Neptune, which was to serve alongside its existing ships [Achilles](#) and Leander joined Admiral Cunningham's Malta-based Force K. At that time there was considerable effort concentrated on disrupting enemy supply lines from Italy to North Africa. In the months leading up to December 1941, as many as 77% of ships sailing from Italy to Tripoli were sunk.

On the night of 19 December 1941, there occurred one of the most extensive but least known naval disasters of the Second World War when Neptune ran into an uncharted enemy minefield in the Mediterranean off Tripoli, and sank



with the loss of 764 officers and men. Of the 764 men who lost their lives, 150 were New Zealanders.

The Anderson twins, Able seaman Henry Bruce Anderson and Able Seaman William John Anderson both aged 20 years from Glendowie, Auckland. They were both lost on HMS Neptune - photo courtesy of the RNZN Museum

Seven men from Northern Ireland lost their lives. They were from Belfast,

Bangor, Larne, Limavady, Portadown and Cullion in County Tyrone.

Just one man was rescued by an Italian torpedo boat, after 5 days in the water.

Following so soon after the loss of the [Prince of Wales and the Repulse](#) in the Far East, it was not surprising that Britain worked hard to conceal the scale of the calamity at the time. Details of the losses of HMS Neptune would not be released for six months. (See entry for William Logue in RH below).

HMS Neptune, commanded by Captain Rory O'Connor, was leading 'Force K', a Cruiser raiding squadron. Their task was

to destroy German and Italian convoys carrying troops and supplies to Libya, in support of Rommel's army in North Africa.

On 17 December 1941 every available ship was deployed in an effort to ensure that the oiler HMS Breconshire arrived safely in Malta. The threat came not only from aircraft but also from two Italian Battleships, whose presence indicated the Italians' intention to sail a convoy to Tripoli. Force K sailed on the afternoon 18 December 1941 in an attempt to intercept it.

The three cruisers of 'Force K', the Neptune, Aurora and Penelope, supported by the destroyers Kandahar, Lance, Lively and Havock, were steaming south, in single line ahead on a dark, stormy night when at 0106 am, the Neptune struck a mine.

The Aurora her next astern, hauled out to starboard but only a minute later she too exploded a mine; two minutes later an explosion buffeted Penelope's port side abreast the bridge.

Neptune going full astern hit another mine, which wrecked her steering gear and propellers and brought her to a standstill. The cruiser force had run into a minefield in a depth of water and at a distance from land which made it utterly unexpected.

Aurora contrived to turn and steam out of the field without further catastrophe, followed by the Penelope; Captain Agnew, in command of Aurora considered the situation in all its dire gravity.

They were 15 miles from Tripoli and it was nearly dawn. The damage to Aurora had reduced her maximum speed to 10 knots, and his duty was to get her as far from the enemy coast as he could before daylight. The risk of sending another ship into the minefield to tow the Neptune out was hardly justified but the need to save life made it imperative.

The destroyers Kandahar and Lively then entered the minefield in an attempt to reach the Neptune and tow her out. Captain Nicholl was also cautiously edging the Penelope towards her when at 0318 the Kandahar struck a mine. Captain O'Connor of the Neptune flashed a warning : "Keep away". At 0403 she struck a fourth mine which exploded amidships. This was more than her hull could take; she slowly turned over and sank.

The Captain of the crippled Kandahar, made his last signal to the Penelope. "Suggest you should go" he said bluntly. "I clearly cannot help you" replied Captain Nicholl, "God be with you"; and to the Lively "course 010 degrees, speed 15 knots."

The dawn found Kandahar still afloat but submerged from abaft the funnel. Of possible survivors from the Neptune, nothing could be seen. All day they waited and with the darkness the sea rose. It carried the Kandahar clear of the minefield, but she was listing ominously.

Then at 4 a.m. the destroyer Jaguar, sent to the rescue from Malta, appeared out of the darkness. With Jaguar positioning herself upwind of the Kandahar, the ship's company jumped in the water, and as the Jaguar drifted

slowly down towards them a total of 8 officers and 170 crew were pulled out, but 73 men had perished. With dawn breaking, the Jaguar fired a torpedo into the Kandahar to sink her and set out back to Malta.



ROLL OF HONOUR HMS NEPTUNE

+DONALDSON, James Nolan

RN. Able Seaman. D/JX 146755. Date of Death:19/12/1941.
Age:22. HMS Neptune. Son of Jonathan and Anna
Donaldson, **Belfast**. Plymouth Naval Memorial, Panel 46

+HAMILTON, Albert

RN. Able Seaman. D/SSX 26639. Date of Death:
19/12/1941. Age: 34. HMS Neptune. Son of Annie Hamilton,
Portadown. Plymouth Naval Memorial, Panel 47. St Mark's
Parish Church, Portadown WM

+HARRISON, Robert Lyttle

RM. Marine. PLY/X 3783. Died 19/12/1941. Age:19. HMS Neptune. Son of David and Florence Irene Harrison, **Bangor**. Plymouth Naval Memorial, Panel 59

+HILL, James

RN. Stoker 2nd Class. D/SKX 39, Died 19/12/1941. Age 19. HMS Neptune. Son of William and Annie Hill, **Larne**. Plymouth Naval Memorial, Panel 54

+LOGUE, William Robert John

RN. Able Seaman. D/SSX 16115. HMS Neptune. Died 19/12/1941. Age 25. Second son of William John and Anna Albertha Logue, Ballyclose St., **Limavady**. Confirmation of his loss by the Admiralty reported in Derry Standard 24/06/1942. Limavady RNA RH. Plymouth Naval Memorial, Panel 47

+STEWART, Joseph

RN. Ordinary Telegraphist. D/SSX 30567. Died 19/12/1941. Age 21. The Achilles-class cruiser HMS Neptune was sunk by mines off Tripoli with the loss of 763 lives. There was only one survivor.. Son of John and Elizabeth Stewart, **Cullion**, Co. Tyrone. Plymouth Naval Memorial, Panel 50, Column 3

+WYLIE, Samuel

RN. Boy 1st Class. D/JX 184582. HMS Neptune. Died 19/12/1941. Age 17. Son of Samuel and Minnie Wylie, **Belfast**. Plymouth Naval Memorial, Panel 50

Acknowledgments

CWGC

Neptune Association

RNRN Museum

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The **remembrance ni** programme is overseen by Very Rev Dr Houston McKelvey OBE, QVRM, TD who served as Chaplain to 102 and 105 Regiments Royal Artillery (TA), as Hon. Chaplain to RNR and as Chaplain to the RBL NI area and the Burma Star Association NI. Dr McKelvey is a Past President of Queen's University Services Club. He may be contacted at houston.mckelvey@btinternet.com

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