



The Rum Tub or Norrie's Nocturnal and Nautical Natter

In this issue

Editorial	1
The Island of Herm	2
A unique 'Z' Class destroyer	3
Chinese carrier sails in Taiwan Strait ..	4
Replacement for the Bergen?	5-6
Capt. Charles Nixon-Eckersall Obit	7-8
Plymouths Dirty Secret	9-11
Branch photo & Humour	12
A bit of Canada in Devon	13-14

Older Men Scam

Women often receive warnings about protecting themselves at the mall and in dark parking lots, etc. This is the first warning I have seen for men. A 'heads up' for those men who may be regular customers at Tesco, Home Base, Sainsbury's, or even ASDA

This one caught me totally by surprise. Over the last month I became a victim of a clever scam while out shopping. Simply going out to get supplies has turned out to be quite traumatic. Don't be naive enough to think it couldn't happen to you or your friends

Here's how the scam works;

Two very beautiful, college-age girls will come over to your car or truck as you are packing your purchases into your vehicle. They both start wiping your windshield with a rag and Windex, with their breasts almost falling out of their skimpy T-shirts. (*It's impossible not to look*). When you thank them and offer them a tip, they say 'No' but instead ask for a ride to McDonald's.

You agree and they climb into the vehicle on the way, they start undressing. Then one of them starts crawling all over you, while the other one steals your wallet.

I had my wallet stolen November 4th, 9th, 10th, twice on the 15th, again on the 17th, 20th, 24th, and the 28th. Also December 1st, 2nd, 8th, twice on the 9th & 10th, and very likely again tomorrow and Friday

So tell your friends to be careful. What a horrible way to take advantage of us older men

HMS Ulster Rum Tub

Volume 9,

Issue 1

February 2020

Editorial

By Shipmate Norrie Millen

Hi! Shipmates,

Well another new year and new decade. I wonder what this year will bring. I know a lot of our shipmates have suffered health problems as indeed I have. Also a few of us have had family experiencing serious medical issues too. I sincerely trust and pray that is behind us all now or at least well on way to recovery. I guess a lot of us are getting a bit long in the tooth, so naturally health will manifest or other conditions deteriorate. Having just celebrated my 78th birthday I feel my age physically, although mentally I am still around 55! Mind you I am one of the 'younger;' members of the group!



This year sees my local RNA Torbay Branch celebrate its 75th anniversary, quite a record when so many Branches have folded due to lack of recruits. Added to the fact that the modern matelot shows little interest in joining the RNA and if they do appear once or twice during their free membership year on leaving Royal Navy, we rarely see them anymore. This inspires me to think that maybe we have it wrong. We are looked upon as an 'Old Boys' club. Maybe we should be thinking about events and meetings that will appeal to the younger ex sailor and Royal Marine.

Many thanks to those of you that have submitted quite few articles, suggestions and links for the newsletter. I now have quite a bit of material, so if your article does not appear in this issue, it certainly warrants space in future editions.

For those of you that attended 2013, 14 & 15 reunions, you will know doubt recall with warmth Captain 'Basher' Jas Briggs. Never did find out how he acquired nickname of 'Basher' as he was one of the finest ships handlers in the RN, never needing a tug even on Ark Royal! His dear wife Rosemary submitted a poem she had written about him which I have included in this issue.

Well it has been some winter, the only time I recall rain like this was out the Far East during monsoon season. However I guess we cannot complain too much, we had some brilliant weather last year and the bottom line is we are still the right side of the grass with our wooden overcoats in the layapart store.

The way I see it anyway!

The Island Of Herm

By Rosemary Briggs July 2019

Does his spirit roam there still?
The boat dried out beside the harbour.
Walking up the hill to Sunday service
In St Tugual's Chapel, where
He liked to read the lesson, if invited.
The man who took a warship in to Mevagissey.

⚓ ⚓ ⚓ ⚓ ⚓ ⚓ ⚓ ⚓ ⚓

We walked together round the island,
Watched the puffins flying off the cliffs,
Stopped at Belvoir Bay for some refreshment,
And spoke of former days.
The man who took a warship in to Mevagissey.

⚓ ⚓ ⚓ ⚓ ⚓ ⚓ ⚓ ⚓ ⚓

For once, at Herm, he took a warship there and
Anchored off the beach at Belvoir Bay.
He'd asked to come ashore and shoot some pheasants.

The Tenant's reply, with a 'typo',
"No more than two peasants per gun."
The man who took a warship in to Mevagissey.

⚓ ⚓ ⚓ ⚓ ⚓ ⚓ ⚓ ⚓ ⚓

He loved to navigate the rocky shores
Around the Channel Isles.
He knew the tides, and understood the wind.
His crew were always safe with him,
The man who took a warship in to Mevagissey.

⚓ ⚓ ⚓ ⚓ ⚓ ⚓ ⚓ ⚓ ⚓

The voyage across via Alderney, precise the time to
Take the tide, and ride "The Swinge" to Braye.
To see old friends and eat seafood,
And take the dogs ashore.

The man who took a warship in to Mevagissey.

⚓ ⚓ ⚓ ⚓ ⚓ ⚓ ⚓ ⚓ ⚓

From there the trip across to Herm.
Familiar beacons sighted on the way,
The Grand Amfroque, the Noire Pute,
And Sark on the horizon –
Rosaire Steps and then the harbour.
Check the leading marks to take us in
And scrunch upon the beach.
So, does his spirit roam there still?

The man who took a warship in to Mevagissey



Eds Note: I have a pair
of socks just like those
in picture!

Veteran's railcard for cheaper train fares to launch on Armistice Day

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-51201885>

**WHAT DO WE LEARN
FROM COWS,
BUFFALOS AND
ELEPHANTS??**

**IT'S IMPOSSIBLE TO
REDUCE WEIGHT BY
EATING GREEN
GRASS AND SALADS
AND WALKING.**

**I'm best man at my buddy's
second wedding....Is it appropriate
to open my dinner speech with**

**Welcome back
everyone?"**

**The biggest lie I tell
myself is,
"I don't need to write
that down, I'll
remember it."**



A Unique 'Z' Class Destroyer

By Shipmate Norrie Millen

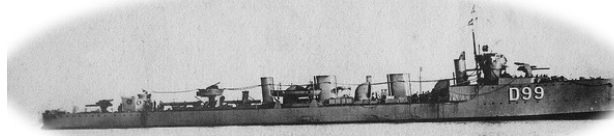
I first came across this unusual snippet whilst aboard my last ship, HMS Zulu. It came up as a quiz question sometime after and participants were amazed when I knew the answer.

There's nothing particularly odd about the ship itself - a standard Tribal Class with one U boat sunk during WW1. What is odd is how the ship was constructed.

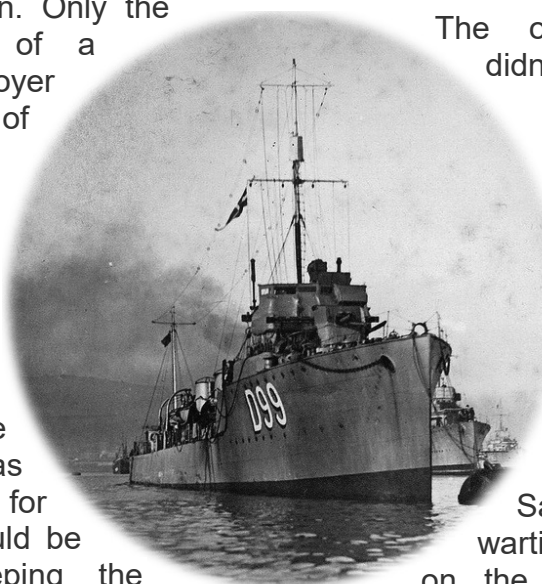
The story begins on 27 October 1916 with HMS Nubian, whose bow was badly damaged in a torpedo attack, and was severed in a storm that evening.

In November of that year, another ship of the same class, HMS Zulu, hit a mine laid by a German submarine that completely blew off the stern. Only the close proximity of a French destroyer meant the rest of the ship survived.

Now, normally these two accidents would be the end of two warships, but with WW1 in full swing, the Royal Navy was desperate for anything that would be capable of keeping the Channel clear of any German ships. Upon looking at one ship with a perfect stern, but no bow, and one with a perfect bow,



HMS Zulu in port minus stern



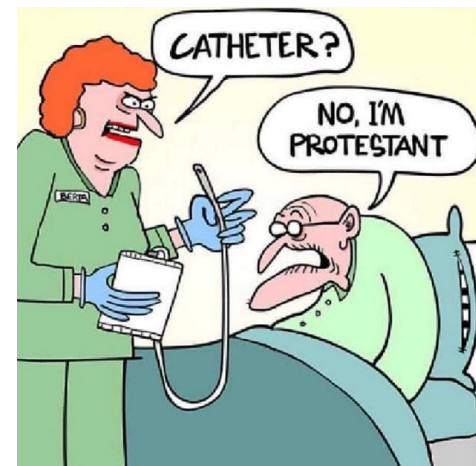
but no stern, you can probably work out what was done....

In July of 1917, HMS Zubian (a portmanteau of the original two names) became a member of the Tribal class her two sisters had been a part of before her. Due to the very loose requirements of the class, every single ship was unique, so Zubian fit in perfectly, although odd quirks were her two different sizes of smokestack (the hulls had been combined between the third and fourth, hence the difference) and slight inexplicable bulge of

89mm - one of either Zulu or Nubian was wider than the other...

The odd birth didn't hinder Zubian, sinking UC-50

in February 1918, and performing well throughout the remainder of the war. Another odd fact about the ship is that it is believed to be the only Royal Navy ship to have no casualties caused by the Spanish Flu epidemic in 1919. Sadly, due to the stresses of wartime, HMS Zubian was scrapped on the 9th December 1919, her job completed.



China confirms aircraft carrier sailed through Taiwan Strait

From the Internet

BEIJING - China confirmed on Monday that its first domestically built aircraft carrier had sailed through the Taiwan Strait for "routine" training and tests after Taipei accused Beijing of intimidation around upcoming elections.



The ship, which has yet to be named, is Beijing's second carrier and will add massive firepower to its navy

The ship, which has yet to be named, is Beijing's second carrier and will add massive firepower to its navy once it is officially put into service as it faces tensions with self-ruled Taiwan and regional neighbours around the disputed South China Sea.

The carrier crossed the sensitive waters on Sunday before entering the South China Sea for "scientific research tests and routine training", navy spokesman Cheng Dewei said on an official social media account.

Cheng said it was "normal practice" for carriers that are under testing to conduct cross-regional trials.

"It is not aimed at any specific target and has nothing to do with the current situation," Cheng said without elaborating.

The sail-by comes as Taiwan gears up for presidential elections in January.

Taipei's foreign minister Joseph Wu tweeted on Sunday that China "intends to intervene in #Taiwan's elections", adding: "Voters won't be intimidated!"

Taiwan's defence ministry said it had dispatched ships and planes to track and closely monitor the carrier's movements, and that US and Japanese vessels trailed it in the strait.

China, which sees self-ruled democratic Taiwan as part of its territory, has stepped up military drills around the island since Beijing-sceptic President Tsai Ing-wen, who is seeking re-election, came to power in 2016.

Tsai -- who has voiced support for Hong Kong's pro-democracy movement -- has described the elections as a fight for Taiwan's freedom and democracy.

Her challenger favours much warmer relations with China.

On the same day as the sail-

by, Tsai announced that former premier William Lai, who has styled himself as a "Taiwan independence

worker," would be her running mate in a move likely to irritate Beijing.

The "Type 001A" carrier was launched in 2017 and sea trials began the following year, but it has yet to be officially put into service.

The state-run Global Times, a nationalist tabloid, cited an anonymous military expert as saying the ship likely sailed through the strait to dock at its possible home base in south China's Hainan Island.

Hainan province is in the South China Sea, east of Vietnam, which has competing claims in the waterway along with China, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan and Brunei.

China has one other carrier, the Liaoning, a repurposed Soviet carrier bought from Ukraine that went into service in 2012.

A US think-tank reported in May that recent satellite photographs indicated that construction of a third Chinese aircraft carrier was well under way.

Tip of the day.

If the queue is too long just cough and say, " This is the worst it's been since I got back from China!"

Could This New Way Of Carrying Kit Replace The Bergen?

Submitted by Shipmate Kevin Maguire

The Wild Goose - How useful could it be?

Reducing weight and having to rely on a better resupply chain has been the answer to the age-old issue of reducing an infantryman's load in which they have to carry.

Having that as an only option can create challenges if supply chains fall through.

Reducing the weight a soldier carries while on operations is seen as a priority in the Armed Forces but this is an issue that is yet to be fully solved.

Could the Wild Goose – a motorised vehicle be the answer to the infantry's 'fight light' dilemma?

Go with more, but carry less.

Yariv Sagi, CEO of Israeli defence manufacturers Marom Dolphin which produces the Wild Goose, said: "The Wild Goose is a game changer in the battlefield - by reducing the weight carried on the soldier's back we are expanding the survivability of the soldier and the entire unit."

Soldiers worldwide risk muscular and skeletal injuries as they carry heavy weights on their backs for years.



A wheeled pack could help to negate a soldier's risk of being injured, as it could reduce their burden down to basic combat equipment, body armour, helmet and rifle.

This particular design is made by Israeli manufacturer, Marom Dolphin, which develops, manufactures and markets personal military supplies such as tactical and bulletproof vests for police units, armed forces and security services worldwide.

The company is also an authorised supplier to the Israeli military.

The Wild Goose is battery-operated and designed to carry heavy equipment over uneven terrain.



It is available in two variants, a 2x2 and 4x4. The 2x2's maximum payload is 60kg and the 4x4 can carry up to 120kg in weight.

Wild Goose - Picture Marom Dolphin

They can even be adapted to attach a stretcher for casualty evacuation.

This hybrid electric vehicle has been tested and can haul equipment over some of the toughest terrain and through rough weather conditions.

Soldiers are able to have both hands free for operating their weapon and in case of emergency, the Wild Goose has a quick-release function.



The aim is that dismounted soldiers would become less fatigued and able to carry more equipment - improving their performance.

Being able to deploy with more, could also reduce the demand on re-supply of vital equipment such as water, ammunition and medical supplies.

The tyres are made from highly durable rubber, so there's no worries in getting a 'flatty'.

The manufacturers say that batteries can be quickly and easily changed. Under one full charge the batteries can cover a distance of about 20 kilometres.

The Wild Goose is made from body flexible polymer and alloy aluminium, so it could even be 'squaddie proof'.

Features

- Dual motor
- Electronic differential lock
- Hill-decent setting
- Lightweight aluminium with polymer flexible body
- Adjustable suspension
- Patented elastic goose-neck
- Near-silent operation

The Wild Goose is currently in operational use with the Special Forces of the Israeli Defence Force (IDF). A non-disclosure agreement prohibits naming other specific units.

The Ship's Cat

Submitted by Shipmate Alan Port

Note. Although I ran a similar article back in 2016, this has a slightly different twist and involves not one but two cats.

As far back as ancient Egypt families storing grain over winter realised the value of the domesticated cat for keeping vermin away from their valuable crops. It was therefore no surprise that cats became

regular members of the ship's crew whenever food needed protection from the rats which would scurry onboard and hide in the bilges waiting to sneak out and steal the crew's rations.

This tradition carried on into the Second World War and some cats received fame, or notoriety, for their exploits.

Perhaps the most famous Royal Navy cat was 'Able Seaman Simon'. In 1948 the frigate HMS Amethyst was storing ship at 'Stonecutters' Island' in Hong Kong when a black and white cat called Simon was smuggled onboard by a young sailor. Fortunately the Captain took a liking to Simon and, as the ship had a vacancy for a good rat-catcher, Simon was pressed into service.

Simon quickly settled into naval life and, when not catching rats, spent his time sleeping on the Captain's bunk, on the chart table, or even in the Captain's Hat! However, Simon's idyllic life was about to be upset by a turn of events. HMS Amethyst was ordered to sail to Nanking to take up the role of guard ship in April 1949. As history records, the Amethyst came under fire on passage up the Yangtze River. The Captain was killed and Simon wounded when a Chinese shell struck the ship. Three pieces of shrapnel were removed from Simon's back, but he survived and, according to the crew, lifted their spirits during the four months the Amethyst was held captive by the People's Liberation Army.

In July 1949, the Amethyst made a daring escape and was able to return home, together with the brave Able Seaman Simon. Tragically, however, Simon succumbed to his wounds, but not before he had been awarded the Amethyst Campaign Medal, the Blue Cross Medal for animal bravery and



heroism, and the Dickin Medal - the animal version of the Victoria Cross (he remains the only cat to have received this award).

Other feline casualties of war occurred across the Navy deemed 'missing in action' were 'Ginger' and 'Fishcakes', inhabitants of HMS Hood. They were not however the only animals lost when the Bismarck sunk the Hood. The Hood, which was called by some 'Noah's Ark', is reported to have gone down with a goat, a possum, a squirrel, a monkey, a marmoset, a beaver, a variety of birds, a wallaby and a dog!

Two notable cats

Finally, there is the tale of the luckiest (or unluckiest) cat in the Royal Navy - Oscar, also known as 'Unsinkable Sam'

It is recorded that the Bismarck had, amongst its crew, a black cat called 'Oskar' who was onboard when the Bismarck's gunners sent Ginger and Fishcakes to a watery grave.

However, revenge came quickly, when a torpedo from a Swordfish aircraft from HMS Ark Royal disabled the Bismarck. The Royal Navy closed in and carried out Winston Churchill's order to 'Sink the Bismarck'.

Oskar, however, was not done for and was spotted (and painted for posterity) floating on a piece of wood in the middle of the ocean. He was picked up by HMS Cossack and re-named 'Oscar'.



Unfortunately, his rescue was not to prove an entirely lucky break as the Cossack was herself sunk five months

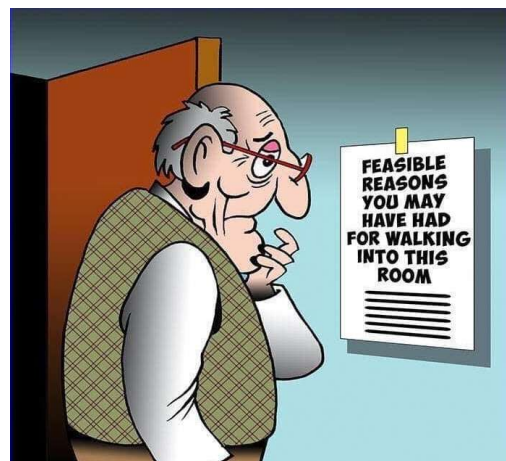
later. Oscar, however, having survived one sinking, knew the drill and again made it onto a piece of floating debris and, in a bizarre twist of fate, was picked up by HMS Ark Royal - the ship that had sent Oskar into the water only a few months earlier.

Oscar, now re-named 'Unsinkable Sam' was not finished with the war just yet. The following year it was HMS Ark Royal's turn to be sunk in enemy action (this led to some believe that Oscar, or Oskar, was revenging the memory of his first masters onboard the Bismarck).

This time Seaman Tom Blundell saved Oscar's life and both of them were picked up by HMS Legion. However, Oscar's reputation as a cat that sank ships resulted in him being handed over to the Harbour Master in Gibraltar. Oscar's sea time was over. His last posting was to an Old Sailors' Home in Belfast where he saw out his days, dying in 1955 at the age of 15.

PS: Despite HMS Legion landing the 'jinxed' Oscar she did not escape the 'curse of the Bismarck', for she too was sunk in March 1942.

Eds. Notes: As for Sam's legacy, it goes to show that even in the most dire of circumstances, even as everything around you is crumbling down, you can still cling on to a piece of wood, get rescued, and move on to another ship and start over again. Or it goes to show that cats really do have 9 lives — all of which are absolutely worth living.



Captain Charles Nixon-Eckersall

Charismatic submariner whose calmness averted catastrophe when his vessel suffered an explosion off Gibraltar – obituary

4 DECEMBER 2019

Captain Charles Nixon-Eckersall, who has died aged 81, was one of the most experienced and charismatic submariners of the post-war era, and commanded three generations of boats.

In 1968 Nixon-Eckersall was promoted lieutenant-commander and passed his “perisher”; the fierce, make-or-break course for would-be submarine commanders under Commander Sandy Woodward, before taking command of the submarine *Alliance*.

He proved a knowledgeable and inspirational captain with a special skill in leadership and the ability to energise his people. A normal tour would have included operations in British waters and in the Mediterranean, but his command was foreshortened when, in November that year, while diving at 450ft off Gibraltar, *Alliance* suffered an explosion and fire in the motor-room which destroyed the boat’s electrical switchboards and propulsion.

All Nixon-Eckersall’s qualities were brought into play as he calmly ordered air to be blown into all buoyancy tanks and brought the submarine to the surface. After making first-aid repairs, he returned to harbour on the surface using one shaft and one diesel engine. At Gibraltar more work was done and *Alliance* was able to make a slow return to Chatham for further repairs.



In March the following year, Nixon-Eckersall took command of the Royal Australian Navy submarine *Onslow*, which was then building at Scott Lithgow’s yard on the Clyde. *Onslow*, the fourth of six boats ordered by Australia, was a diesel-powered boat encompassing the latest technologies.

After finishing work-up at Faslane, *Onslow* visited Plymouth, London and Portsmouth before commencing a 92-day voyage to Australia via the Panama Canal and across the Pacific.

She spent two weeks in Pearl Harbour, exercising at sea with the US Navy, before arriving at Brisbane. There, Vice-Admiral Sir Victor Smith, Chief of Naval Staff, joined *Onslow* for a two-day voyage to Sydney.

Nixon-Eckersall made a dramatic submerged entry into the harbour, passing through the Heads at periscope depth early on the morning of July 4 1970. Smith was surprised at how many small boats and ferries were already enjoying the day as *Onslow* surfaced just inside South Head without incident and, to the crew’s disappointment, without creating a fuss.

Nixon-Eckersall

Promoted to commander in 1975, Nixon-Eckersall commanded the nuclear-powered hunter-killer submarine *Courageous* in 1977-79, deploying to the Mediterranean and in the Atlantic, including major fleet exercises and trials of the *Tigerfish*



torpedo. Every boat Nixon-Eckersall commanded was well reported upon and, uniquely, all three can be visited as museum ships, in Gosport, Devonport and Sydney.

Charles Andrew Barkly Nixon-Eckersall was born on December 19 1937 at Datchet in Berkshire. His mother taught at a private school, Commonweal Lodge in Surrey, and he boarded there from the age of three, firstly at its wartime home at Lewdown in Devon, and then at Hydneye House in Hastings; his father, a Royal Marine, was taken prisoner at Tobruk.

Young Charles attended Westerleigh School at St Leonards-on-Sea in Sussex, from where he won a scholarship to Kelly College at Tavistock in Devon, and, in 1954, a place at Britannia Royal Naval College, Dartmouth.

Aged 16 Nixon-Eckersall flew solo in one of the naval college's Tiger Moths, but after academic and professional training, and seetime in the cruiser Birmingham, then flagship of the Mediterranean Fleet, he opted for submarine service.

In 1957 he joined the submarine *Sea Scout* as sixth hand: many of the diesel-powered boats which he served in the 1950s and early 1960s, including *Sentinel*, *Scorcher*, *Tactician*, *Anchorite*, *Ambush* and *Artemis*, were little changed from their wartime configuration. He also stood by the more modern submarine, *Osiris*, while she was building at Barrow-in-Furness, and in 1967 he became first lieutenant of *Oberon*.

Nixon-Eckersall was also second-in-command of the anti-submarine frigates *Naiad* and *Euryalus* in 1971-73, and a successful staff operations officer in the

1st Submarine Squadron at Gosport, and, after *Courageous*, on the Defence Policy Staff in Whitehall.

Promoted to captain in 1981, Nixon-Eckersall was a student at the Royal College of Defence Studies, where time spent with him was always a delightful mix of challenge, stimulation and fun. He relished debate, but there was always an inner core of empathy.

In 1985-86 he commanded the frigate *Boxer* before holding senior NATO staff appointments at Norfolk, Virginia (1987-89), and at Northwood in Middlesex in 1989-90. Although regarded as one of the outstanding officers of his generation, Nixon-Eckersall was not selected for flag rank, and retired in the 1990s to Hanwell in Oxfordshire.

There he took up charity work, including for the RNLI, the sea cadets, Banbury Community Transport and St Peter's church, and served on the parish council.

When his elderly mother did not want to attend his second wedding because she could not manage to climb over two other submarines to attend the reception held in *Courageous*, Nixon-Eckersall arranged a crane to lift her over and down a hatch to the reception. When it returned her to shore later that afternoon in a merry mood, his sailors were ordered to avert their gaze with an "Eyes in the boat!"

In 1959 Charles Nixon-Eckersall married Sally Evans. They divorced in 1977, and in 1978 he married a South African, Susie Syfret, who survives him with a daughter and a son from the first marriage.
Captain Charles Nixon-Eckersall, born December 19 1937, died November 11 2019

**The oldest computer can
be traced back to Adam &
Eve**

 **Surprise! Surprise!** 
It was an Apple.
**But with extremely limited
memory. Just 1 Byte.**
Then everything crashed.

**I tried to re-marry my ex-wife.
But she figured out I was only
after my money!**

Plymouth's dirty secret: The Royal Marines executed on the Hoe

Source: Derek Tait Plymouth local history: Execution on Plymouth Hoe

Execution on Plymouth Hoe

If you look around on Plymouth Hoe you will come across this on the floor

Between the Naval Memorial and the Hoe Lodge Gardens, there is a cross with the number '3' embedded in the pavement. This marks the spot where three Royal Marines were executed by firing squad on 6 July, 1797. Their names were Lee, Coffy and Branning and they were found guilty of attempting to excite a mutiny at Stonehouse Barracks. Another Marine, M Gennis was convicted of a similar crime and sentenced to 1000 lashes and transported to Botany Bay for life.

The incident was reported in the Sherborne and Yeovil Mercury on Monday 10th July, 1797. It read:

'PLYMOUTH, July 8 - On Wednesday morning an express arrived here from the War-Office, with a warrant for the execution of Lee, Coffy, and Branning, three marines who were last week tried by a General Court-Martial, and found guilty of an attempt to excite a mutiny among the marine corps at Stone-house Barracks and on Thursday at 12 o'clock the troops at this place and in the neighbourhood, consisting of the Sussex fencible cavalry, four companies of the royal artillery, the Lancashire, East Devon and Essex regiments of militia, the 25th regiment of foot, royal independent invalids, and Plymouth volunteers, assembled on the Hoe, and formed in a half circle in order to witness the execution. M Gennis, another marine tried for a similar crime, and sentenced to receive 1000 lashes, and to be afterwards transported to Botany Bay for life, was brought on the ground soon after twelve o'clock, and received 500 lashes, and then conveyed back to Stone-house Barracks. At half past one o'clock, Lee, Coffy and Branning were marched from the Citadel under the escort of a party of marines,

with a coffin before each, proceeded by the band of that corps playing the Dead March in Saul.

The former was attended by the Rev. Dr. Hawker; and the two latter by a Roman Catholic priest, who after praying with them near an hour, quitted them, and they all three knelt

on their coffins for a few minutes, when an officer of marines

came and drew the caps over their faces, and a party of twenty marines immediately came down and put a period to their existence by discharging the contents of their muskets through their

bodies, after which all the regiments marched round them

in solemn procession, the whole forming, perhaps, one of the most awful scenes that the human eye ever witnessed. They all behaved in a manner becoming their melancholy situation, and apparently very resigned and penitent. About thirty thousand people were supposed to be present at the execution'.

There was more to the execution than mentioned in the newspaper though. Ten thousand men of the Fleet and garrison were there to watch them die and most of Plymouth appeared to have turned out too. When the three men faced the firing squad and the shots were fired, Coffy and Branning fell forward, dead, into their coffins. However, Lee was not hit and had to go through the whole procedure again. The reserve firing squad lined up, took aim and fired but again Lee was untouched. Once more, they loaded up, took aim but again missed Lee. In the end, a sergeant came up behind him and shot him dead at close range. It seems odd that the firing squad missed Lee three times and perhaps there was some sympathy with him amongst the troops.

Earlier fourteen seamen had been hanged at the yardarm on their ships in the Sound.

This was to be Plymouth's last public execution.



Another part of the tale:

The public execution - by firing squad - was witnessed by some 50,000 people. It was 220 years ago that three men were marched out from their Citadel cells on to the Hoe - carrying the coffins they would be taken away in again.

The last public execution of its kind to be held in Plymouth, it was attended by about 10,000 military personnel and 40,000 civilians.

Supposedly shot by the men that provided evidence against them, the three Marines from Stonehouse Barracks had all been found guilty of mutiny - traitors to the admiralty.

With a full procession and military band, the men were lined up and shot in ways designed to cause them maximum pain before they died - with gaping holes left in their bodies.

The gruesome execution was watched by thousands

A fourth perpetrator, whose sentence was lessened, was given 450 lashings on the same day, until he passed out. The final 50 lashings were given when he regained consciousness.

But it is the view of some that the men were not traitors at all, merely "scapegoats" for a much larger group - who weren't planning anything particularly malicious.

Keith Black of Plymouth Ocean City Tours has been exploring and researching this exact story for four years, and has described the execution as "Plymouth's dirty little secret".

And Wesley Ashton, a local military historian with Hidden Heritage, who has spent time transcribing the original court documents from the hearings more than two centuries ago, said it is only now the truth has emerged.

"I think opinions are changing now about the execution," said Mr Ashton. "There was really no malice [in their mutiny plot] at all."

Mr Black added: "I do not identify the executed men as anything other than scapegoats of a far larger group involved in behaviour against appalling and delayed wages paid to sailors and Marines at the time."

"In this year of 1797 there had been numerous acts of mutiny along the south coast of England. The demands of the sailors had been met for the 'shilling a day', but unfortunately this news had not reached the sailors and Marines by May 28, when the Marines were detained."

Robert Lee, who is thought to have been shot at least eight times before he finally died, was the main culprit in the whole affair.

Lee, who moved from Dublin to England to join the Marines after his brothers allegedly stopped him from seeing his sweetheart, wrote a distressing letter from his lonely prison cell on the morning of his execution to one of these same siblings.

Beginning, 'My Dear Brother', it continues: 'Your exertions to save my life cannot now avail, yesterday the order for my execution this day arrived. I have but a few short moments to live, and, I trust, that, therefore, what I wish to impart to you, will be received by you with that seriousness with which it must come from the heart of a dying man.'

'Like you I have been misled by the sophistications of those who deny the truths of the Gospel, and deride the evidence of God's word. Like you I gave them implicit confidence; but, the awfulness of my present state has induced a candid examination of them; and the arguments of the enemies of Divine Revelation, appear now to me in the vilest colours.'

'I have thought it necessary to seek the aid of a Minister of the Gospel, who, I

trust, as a witness to my conversion - to my regeneration - and will testify it - as far as he can be supposed to place a confidence in the sincerity of it.

'On this subject I have no time to add more, than to exhort you to avail yourself of the opportunity you have, to renounce those opinions, which were near proving fatal to my external happiness here after, through the merits of his dear son Jesus Christ, the Redeemer of mankind.'

'The Gentleman who has been considerably instrumental in producing my conversion, will I presume at my request, take up the pen to offer you such arguments as his superior abilities and experience will dictate; and, I have no doubt, if you investigate the truth with a due impartiality, your mind will soon acknowledge that conviction I do, and your soul will be filled with it.'

'Whatever family claims I have, I transfer to my sister Aldridge, and request you will do all in your power to render the evening of her days as comfortable as possible.'



The cross marks the spot where they were killed

'For ever, Farewell dear brother, – remember my last, dying advice, and consult your eternal welfare – recommend my affection to my sisters and brothers, and all friends. Your sincere brother, Robert Lee.'

Mr Ashton believes this was simply a last-ditched attempt at saving his own life by pretending he had converted from Roman-Catholicism to the Church of England, but Mr Black believes different.

"You could not join the Marines if you were Roman Catholic," explained Mr Black. "It was against the rules, but when taken on, they would never ask if you were or not. The Marines were therefore riddled with Roman Catholics.

"When he came to Plymouth Lee's faith waned, and when he arrived at Stonehouse Barracks he was a bit indifferent, which is when he ends up in communication with Reverend Robert Hawker, who took Lee under his wing.

"When Lee was executed, he had converted to being a Protestant, and wrote to his brother suggesting he did the same.

"He asked in the letter that anything he had left be given to his sister, although she probably would not have got anything, and he was subsequently wiped out the family history."

Keith is writing a novel of the events based on the facts known – and his imagination of the unknown.

From the research he has conducted, including sifting through the National Archives, Irish and Australian historical records and numerous other sources, he believes he has enough of an understanding of the events and circumstances leading to the public execution and beyond.

He said: "I do not see these men as traitors at all and hopefully will be able to persuade otherwise in due course. I think this is Plymouth's worst event in history with the Government and Admiralty of the time intent on making an example of a few men, all Irish and all Catholic.

"Some of the witness testimony was at least dubious with financial reward and advancement offered as inducement to provide testimony where none was forthcoming."

Elaborating, Mr Ashton said: "The local myth is that the group was overheard plotting by a drummer boy, but only one out of 22 witnesses suggested a callous side to the plotting, including

blowing up the barracks and freeing French prisoners.

It took eight balls to kill Lee

"All they were really guilty of was planning to refuse to take orders because their friend was going to get a flogging. However, back then a new law said anyone that took an oath faced the death sentence, which is where they went wrong."

On the execution day itself – which was to act as a brutal example for all of the other Marines, seamen and soldiers, saw the whole of the Hoe – then just a bare cliff – awash with these military personnel and members of the public.

First came John Maginnis, the

man who was to receive 500 lashings, followed by the other three men

later in the day, who were to meet their untimely deaths.

"It is one of the most disgraceful things that has ever taken place in our city," said Mr Black. "It is Plymouth's dirty little secret."

Although there is some disagreement about who the three 'traitors' were shot by, Mr Ashton, who has been posting a snippet of the sordid tale every day on the Hidden History Facebook account, believes they were shot by the very same men who gave evidence against them in court – men who they had taken the oath with.

Describing the execution, he said: "They say one of them missed Lee's head on purpose, to cause him more pain.

"The three killed were all under 30 years old. But Maginnis was allowed to live, and was sent to live in Australia in 1799. He received 450 lashings on that day before he passed out.

"By law you had to be conscious, so he was taken back to Stonehouse Barracks where I expect he got some rest and recovered, before the other 50 lashings took place.

"The real twist in the plot is the executioners were made up of co-accused guys who were spared the death penalty.

"There were 12 shots altogether in the first round. Lee didn't appear to have been hit, as they were all through his belly, which winded him and he slumped forwards. The other two died instantly.

"The reserve line of men moved forwards and shot, and one of these shots hit Lee in the head. He fell onto his coffin, still writhing in pain and twitching, and it was then the officer in charge quickly put a pistol to his head.

"It took eight balls to kill Lee. It was a proper bloody execution."



At annual commemoration some people cover their hands and arms in fake blood.