

*In the ever-changing world of shipping today it is perhaps worthwhile looking back to a time when some things never altered. Thousands of young men joined a famous training ship, little knowing how much of an influence their first captain would have on their lives. . . this is the story of that man*

## ***Eric Hewitt, the Last Captain of the "Conway"***

By Brian Elliot

NINETY-ONE year old Capt Eric Hewitt, RD, RNR, the last captain of the training ship HMS *Conway*, died on December 13, 1995.

He was born on July 18, 1904, at Fenton, Staffordshire, where his father owned Fenton Pottery. On May 1, 1919, he joined the *Conway* and left in April 1921 as a working hand having achieved an Extra Conway Certificate. On leaving *Conway* he joined the RNR and was appointed probationary midshipman. The first four months of his training was aboard the aircraft-carrier *Argus* followed by two months aboard the destroyer *Witherington*.

After his RNR training he served his time with the Glen Line and on his first two voyages called at Vladivostok. Following the revolution the country was still suffering unrest and civil war and 1921 was the time of severe famine. In this by-gone era, on-shore, the young Hewitt witnessed many atrocities.

In June 1924 he passed his second mate's certificate at Liverpool, and in November 1924 joined Royal Mail. After passing his first mate's (foreign going) certificate in 1927, just before his 23rd birthday, he was promoted to lieutenant RNR. While serving as an RNR officer he was used as an extra in a silent film "Q Ships" in which Conrad Veidt starred as a Uboat captain. Hewitt's part was as a German naval rating. On film Veidt gave the orders, but in actual fact it was Hewitt conning the submarine. Subsequently he spent one month on a gunnery course and a year in submarines, which the Board of Trade accepted as full sea time.

After obtaining his master's certificate in 1930 he married Marjorie his sweetheart from his *Conway* days. His RNR training continued in submarines until he was promoted to lieutenant commander in 1936, when he returned to surface craft and gunnery.

In December 1938 while still serving as chief officer with Royal Mail Hewitt joined the Defensively Equipped Merchant Ships (DEMS) programme preparing merchant ships and their crews for war. As in World War I the ships were to be fitted with guns on the poop. However, at this time the Admiralty also realised the danger of air attack.

Hewitt lectured on the defence of merchant ships against air attack at Liverpool, London, Southampton and Rotterdam. He also wrote an instruction manual on this, which included a section on action to be taken after a gas attack. The Admiralty approved the manual and it was used in HMS *President* as a textbook for Merchant Navy officers, and in October 1939 Hewitt received an appreciative letter from the Admiral Commanding Reserves.

Shortly before war was declared (September 3, 1939) Hewitt was serving as chief officer with Royal Mail. He was called-up in August 1939 and with the rank of lieutenant-commander appointed to the Cunard White Star armed merchant cruiser *Alaunia*, 14,030 grt, fitting out at Gibraltar. He served aboard her on North Atlantic convoy duty until November 1940, when he was repatriated from Halifax.



*Capt Eric Hewitt*

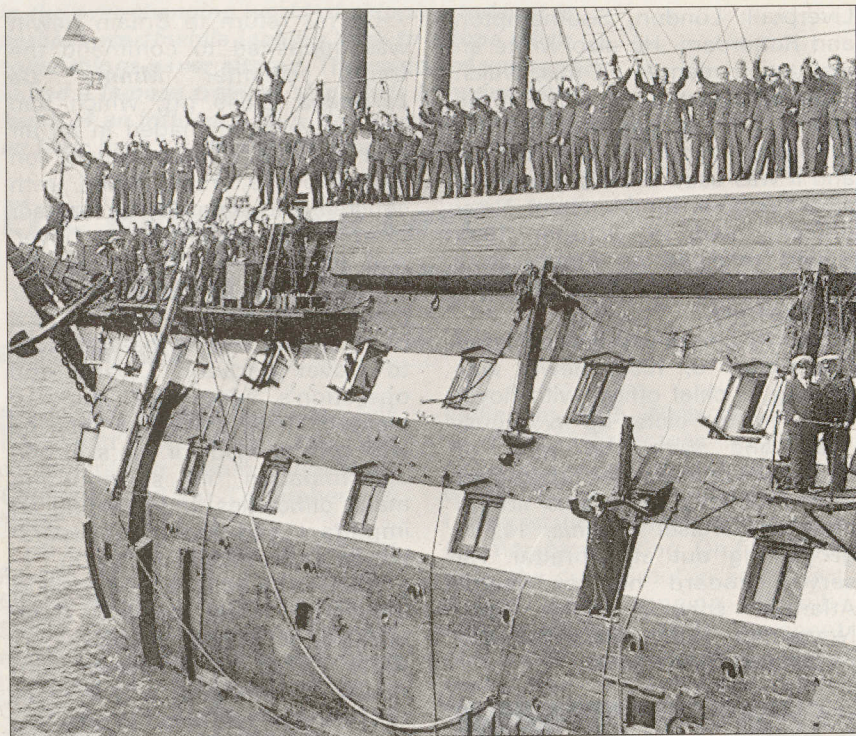
On his return to Britain Hewitt was appointed to command the tramp steamer *Minnie De Larrinaga*, 5,049 grt, which had been severely damaged in an air raid on the London Docks on September 9, 1940. Filled with concrete and dynamite he took her from the

London river to Dover, and while under fire from the German guns at Cape Gris Nez manoeuvred her into position as a block ship at one of the entrances to Dover harbour. Clearly, the operation's successful outcome pleased "Their Lordships" and he was commended for his skill and determination in surmounting many difficulties and bringing an important and hazardous operation to a successful conclusion.

Afterwards he took command of the Flower Class corvette *Aster* building at Belfast. In May 1941 *Aster* sailed for Freetown with Hewitt in command. In November 1941 he was instructed to take five escorts to Cape Town for escort work there, but with Japan's entry into the war (December 7, 1941) the situation changed. On January 1, 1942, he was promoted to commander. In March 1942 he was ordered to take his flotilla to the Far East. However, with the fall of Singapore (February 15, 1942) the flotilla was diverted to Colombo, where they arrived just after the Easter Sunday (March 26, 1942) air-raid was over.

His next command was the sloop *Shoreham*. He stayed with her serving in the Indian Ocean, Persian Gulf, Red Sea and Mediterranean. She took part in *Operation Husky*, the invasion of Sicily (July 10, 1943).

On August 13, 1943, he was Mentioned in Dispatches after the slow Mediterranean UK convoy



*The HMS "Conway". About three thousand cadets passed through the training ship while Hewitt was Captain*

MKS 21, with the 40 ships he was escorting, was attacked by 47 He 111 H-6 torpedo bombers of KG26 (Major Klumpler) off Alboran Island. At least seven aircraft were shot down. The German pilots exaggeratedly claimed 170,000 tons of shipping sunk. In actual fact the only casualties were the Runciman managed *Empire Haven*, 6,852 grt, and the United States Maritime Commission Liberty ship *Francis W. Pettygrove*, 7,176 grt, which were damaged by torpedo hits. *Francis W. Pettygrove* was taken in tow in 36°15'N 02°23'W and arrived at Gibraltar on August 14, 1943. There were no casualties among her 40 crew, 27 gunners and four passengers. *Empire Haven* was not badly damaged and able to continue with the convoy. Admiral Andrew Cunningham, C-in-C Mediterranean, wrote: "I congratulate you, the escort force and convoy against heavy harassing attack. The enemy got a sore head he is likely to remember".

*Empire Haven* had been dispatched from Takoradi on September 15, 1942, to pick-up survivors from the Cunard White Star *Laconia*, 19,695 grt. *Laconia* had been torpedoed by U-156 (Lieutenant Commander Werner Hartenstein) at 2100 GMT on September 12, 1942, in 05°05'S 38°W with 1,800 Italian prisoners-of-war aboard.

Hewitt returned to Britain in February 1944 and was appointed to command the Black Swan Class sloop *Whimbrel* (1,470 tons) which became his favourite ship. Built by Yarrow on the Clyde she was commissioned on August 25, 1942, and attached to Capt Walker's famous Liverpool-based antisubmarine flotilla.

After one patrol Hewitt was transferred to be made escort commander of one of the groups formed for the Normandy Invasion. In December 1944 he became senior officer of the 30th Escort Group in the corvette *Pevensey Castle*, and on one occasion went alongside the MV *Cromarty*, 4,974 grt, in the Channel to extinguish a fire.

After VE Day he went to Bergen to take the surrender of the German U-boats, and received a huge welcome from the Norwegians.

In June 1945 he flew to Ceylon and joined the staff of the Supreme Commander South East Asia Command (SEAC), Admiral Lord Mountbatten, in Kandy, with the rank of acting captain. At that time, aged 39, he had the distinction of being the youngest serving captain in the Royal Navy Reserve. He was appointed Divisional Sea Transport Officer, and on the cessation of hostilities transferred with Lord Mountbatten to Singapore on September 5, 1945. At Singapore he received the sword of his surrendered Japanese counterpart.

Now, besides being in control of all British sea transport throughout the Far East, he was in charge of the repatriations of the Allied

prisoners-of-war, and the surrendered Japanese forces.

Mountbatten mentioned in a conversation with Hewitt that he was looking forward to home leave as he had not seen his wife, Edwina, for 18 months. Hewitt responded that he had not seen his wife for two years, and in 16 years of marriage had been only with her for 16 months. The result was that Marjorie was the first Allied serviceman's wife to join her husband in Singapore after the cease fire.

Lord Mountbatten was appointed Viceroy of India in 1947, and invited Hewitt to delay his "demob," and accompany him to Delhi as Sea Transport Officer. Hewitt flew home in May 1947 before going out to Delhi with his rank as captain confirmed.

While in Singapore one of the Blue Funnel Line senior managers, Sir John Nicholson, had asked Hewitt if he was interested in the appointment as captain of the *Conway*. The salary was £600 a year, then approximately the equivalent of a liner company's chief officer's pay. But with a wife and three children Hewitt did not think it enough.

At the time *Conway's* academic staff were paid in accordance with the Burnham Scale. The officers pay, however, depended on the MMSA. Its General Secretary, Alfred Wilso, had been a sergeantmajor during the Great War, and remained one for the rest of his life. He made the MMSA staff sign a letter of allegiance to him, and was not over generous with what he paid *Conway's* officers. Certainly Goddard had not fared too well on his retirement. However, he was able to supplement his pension by getting a job as a marine paint "rep" with International Paints.

However, during his India appointment Sir John Nicholson approached Hewitt again, and it seems, with a better pay offer, which Hewitt accepted. On flying home from India in March 1948 he mentioned to the taxi driver that he was apprehensive about meeting his three children. He thought that, after 10 months away, they may well regard him as total stranger. On arrival at his home the taxi driver refused to accept the fare saying "let that be my contribution to the war effort".

He served aboard *Conway* as Staff Captain in 1948 until Capt Goddard retired in 1949, when he assumed command.

Aboard the *Conway* Hewitt kept a beautifully varnished sailing dinghy named *Alaunia*, which he allowed occasionally senior competent dinghy hands to sail in the Strait. The unlikely story was that the dinghy had been built by shipwrights aboard the armed merchant cruiser *Alaunia*.

*Conway* ran ashore in the Swellies {Menai Straits} between the Britannia tubular railway bridge and the suspension road bridge on April 14, 1953. She was being towed to Bangor on the first leg of her voyage to Birkenhead for dry-docking and re-fitting, but after grounding she broke her back, and became a Constructive Total Loss. Later in the year *Conway* was relocated as a "stone frigate" in the grounds of the Marquess of Anglesey's home, Plas Newydd, on the Anglesey shore of the Menai Straits.

Rightly or wrongly many "Old Conways" unfairly blamed Hewitt for the ship's loss. Hewitt and Pilot Jones wanted three tugs. However, the Conway Committee considered that two tugs had towed her from her Bangor moorings westward to her new moorings off Plas Newydd on April 12, 1949, and therefore considered that two tugs were sufficient to bring her back eastward. The Swellies is a narrow channel about a mile long between the tubular and suspension bridges.

Slack water, however, occurs one and half hours before high water. *Conway* needed to pass through the Swellies during the 15 to 20 minutes slack water. After slack water the west-going stream soon reaches seven to eight knots. On the day of the tow a fresh northerly breeze added to the difficulties. Pilot Jones knew the intricacies of the Swellies' tides thoroughly, but was probably not so familiar with the depths of water. *Conway* passed under the Britannia Bridge 10 minutes later than planned. Worried about being 10 minutes late before reaching the tubular bridge Pilot Jones, with his local knowledge of the tides, advised Hewitt to retreat as the tow would miss slack water in the Swellies.

Perhaps Hewitt continued as he wanted more water in the channel. The head tug did not have enough power to tow her against the tide. The stern tug cast off intending to make fast forward, but a tow line parted and *Conway* ran aground on the Caernarfon shore.

*Conway's* loss had occurred under Hewitt's command, but it occurred despite his best effort in extremely difficult circumstances. At no time throughout the rest of his life did he try to shift the responsibility onto anyone else, nor did he give the slightest impression that he had a guilt complex about the loss of the old ship.

With his RN administrative experience Hewitt was ideally placed for the changed conditions from a training ship afloat to a shore-based establishment. It was during this period that the ship's headmaster and the academics, in consultation with Hewitt, abolished the Conway and Extra Conway Certificates and replaced them with the more sensible and acceptable GCE "O" and "A" Levels. For a time while captain of the *Conway* he was ADC to the Queen. He also held the lifetime appointment as a Younger Brother of Trinity House, and was a liveryman of the Honourable Company of Master Mariners.

*Conway* was too bound in tradition to adapt to modern training methods. Then the shipping companies were vying with each other to provide better training facilities and systems. The parents realised this and the number of cadets joining dropped. The committee of management had no cash reserve and the ship was taken over by Cheshire Education Committee who had no use for a Captain RNR, and in 1968, when Hewitt was 64, they replaced him with the academic headmaster, who became the head of the *Conway*. The "stone frigate" struggled on before closing in the summer of 1974. About three thousand cadets passed through the *Conway* while Hewitt was captain.

On his retirement the Blue Funnel Line gave Hewitt and his wife a voyage to the Far East. Possibly it was because of the strong Blue Funnel connections with the *Conway*, that on retirement he was also paid a pension by Ocean.

In retirement Hewitt became a part-time coastguard at Penmon at the eastern end of the Menai Strait, and did a spell as High Sheriff of Anglesey in 1971.

Throughout the winter and summer he could be seen tending his garden at "Ty Gwyn", his Penmon home. He was a heavy smoker. One evening he fell asleep while reading a book downstairs. He went to bed unaware that he had dropped his cigarette on his settee. It seems he awoke in the night and either saw light or smoke from the fire. He went downstairs and extinguished the fire with a bucket of water. Exhausted he returned upstairs and collapsed due to having inhaled carbon monoxide.

The next morning the postman raised the alarm. Hewitt was rushed to Bangor Hospital, and from there he was taken to Whiston Hospital, Liverpool, which specialises in burns. He hung on for several days before his final crossing of the bar on December 13, 1995.

Marjorie, who had given him steadfast support during his captaincy of the ship, pre-deceased him.

His son Michael, an old Gordonstoun hand and former naval officer, and daughters Anne and Carol survive him.