

HMS AJAX & RIVER PLATE VETERANS ASSOCIATION
75th Anniversary The Battle of the River Plate
Dedication & Unveiling of Memorial at the National Memorial Arboretum,
Staffordshire, UK

The Creation of our Memorial

In 2012 the Committee met to discuss how to commemorate the 75th Anniversary of The Battle of the River Plate; when 2014 seemed a long way off.

Judi and I (Malcolm Collis), along with my father Joseph, visited the National Memorial Arboretum Staffordshire and were struck by the fact there was absolutely no reference to HMS Exeter or Achilles and only the briefest of mentions of Ajax on one small plaque. We resolved to rectify this national omission. On one impressive memorial was a plate bearing the Stonemason's name; HL Perfitt Ltd at Diss. With an exchange of emails with the Stonemason the Committee believed we could raise the likely funds.

In those two years since conception there had been many meetings and phone calls amongst the Committee members and Keith Rackham the Stonemason and innumerable exchange of emails that got steadily more frequent as 2014 approached.

The basic design was agreed and the various inscriptions worked upon to satisfy the Arboretum's strict requirements – this in itself took many months to complete. Eventually our submission was accepted by the Arboretum and a prime location within the Naval Review section was earmarked for us.

2013 turned into 2014 and suddenly April the 12th seemed rather close. The huge one-piece black granite slab had been ordered from India – Keith saw our memorial as a flagship monument and gave it his utmost attention, hence only the finest granite from India would do.

The first two tonne slab was found to have a crack in it so the Indian Company had to quarry another, shape it and roughly polish it before it could be shipped. By now it was mid-February and this delay meant things were about to get tight, very tight indeed.

To cut a long story short, the stone finally arrived at Diss in Norfolk on the 1st April leaving little time to complete the inscription work before it was to be installed at the Arboretum on the 8th, just 4 days before Dedication day. Judi and I visited the Stonemason premises on the 4th as we were interested in seeing to process, but also to confirm that the mythical slab of granite was just that – granite and not a myth!

As the big day drew ever closer we were confident, well at least happy, that all loose ends had been tied and so our final meeting at the Arboretum on the afternoon before Dedication Day was, hopefully, to be a formality. We confirmed the memorial, the four granite benches, the paved area and time capsule were in situ and couldn't help but have a little peek, with fingers crossed, under the black polythene – all was well.

The weather forecast was set fair, albeit cloudy and a little on the chilly side for the day so the welcome desk, ably "manned" by Judi and Julia Harwood, was moved inside out of the cold wind. The visitors soon started arriving and name badges duly issued.

Everything was going swimmingly and even the last minute announcement that the organist had turned up but not so the organ didn't dampen the ever mounting excitement.

Fred Coates organised the Standard bearers, the Bugler and the Ajax and Achilles Sea Scouts who formed a piping party and guard of honour.

11.30 a.m. and it was time for me to start proceedings, introducing the first speaker, Commodore Paul Hammond representing the First Sea Lord, followed by His Excellency Sir Lockwood Smith the High Commissioner for New Zealand. The Reverend Paul Kerr

conducted the Dedication Ceremony with Peter Danks delivering the Reading. The Exhortation was given by Basil Trott. The Bugler sounded the Last Post and the Standards were dipped for the two minute silence. The conclusion of Reveille signal the moment we had all been waiting for. The four Battle survivors, Jim London and Basil Trott from Exeter and John Garrard and Ted Wicks from Ajax stepped up to the memorial taking hold of the two cords and ably unveiled the black cloth carrying the actual Commodore's Broad Pennant that flew at the Battle. There were gasps from the audience as the massive black Memorial, highlighted by gold lettering, was before them. I had had high expectations for the day but when I saw the completed Memorial in its entirety those expectations were far exceeded – it was magnificent.

The youngest Harwood present, Sebastian, placed the time capsule into its vault sealing in records of those who had sacrificed their lives on the four ships during the war and a list of all those that had supported the commissioning and dedication of the Memorial. Our Photographer Cliff Hoppe managed to take appropriate photographs despite the fact that everyone else was doing likewise.

Those dining made their way to the nearby splendid marquees for luncheon during which there were brief speeches from our Patron Stephen Harwood, Captain Tom Tulloch Royal Canadian Navy who read out a greeting letter from the Mayor of Ajax Ontario. Stephen Harwood's brother, Henry, thanked everyone involved in the day's proceedings and Peter Danks wrapped up the luncheon with a farewell message.

Jonathan Harwood, the Commodore's grandson, managed to pack the nearby Rose Room for his 45 minute presentation upon the Battle that was very well received. He will be repeating this both in Canada and at the December Portsmouth luncheon.

Finally the crowds dispersed and it was time for us to make our way home with a great sense of achievement and elation.

I would like to thank my fellow Committee members, Stephen Harwood, Peter Danks, Jim Smith, Judi Collis and Alf Larkin for their sustained hard work without which there would have been no Memorial. Likewise, a huge thank you to everyone who contributed towards the first of 75th Anniversary events. There will be ongoing costs associated with the Memorial and the December luncheon so additional funds will still be gratefully received.

Malcolm Collis