

Chilean Earthquake 1939 – Malcolm Collis

In amongst the archive items and material collected from the late Ken Jones I came across a few medals from Municipalidad De Concepcion Chile – Gratituda Marinos Exeter y Ajax – Terremoto (*earthquake*) Del 24-1-39 along with about 25 metres of ribbon.

Both Basil Trott (Exeter) and Frank Burton (Ajax) live in Cambridge so just before Christmas 2016 I took the opportunity to pay them both a visit. Basil was first, good timing as it was his 97th birthday the next day and Basil & Sadie were pleased to see me. We chatted about many things and the Chilean earthquake medals came up. It turns out Basil was there with the Exeter but never received any medals. The next day I visited Frank, 98 last September, and had a great session with him as he told me all about his life. He too confirmed he was at Concepcion but had never received a medal even though he had applied for it some years ago: time to rectify the situation.

Back home it was time to do some digging. I came up with six members who were in either *Ajax* or *Exeter* in 1939. I knew Jim London (*Exeter*) already had his as he told us all about it when we saw him at Jim Smith's funeral. He was wearing it on the right which he explained he was told was the correct position for a foreign medal. From the NMA and Portsmouth photographs I was able to ascertain that Ted Wicks (*Ajax*) was wearing his but on the left. It seems Jim got his in the 90s but doesn't remember too much about it; likewise Ted couldn't recall the circumstances of his award when I phoned him but thought the Admiralty had blocked it for many years; he had been told to wear his as the last one on the left! I spoke to John Garrard who confirmed he didn't join *Ajax* until after this episode, in Bermuda. It also seems that Albert Smith (*Ajax*) may have also joined then. This left me with four members who were at Concepcion at the time of the "Terremoto" on 24th January 1939, two of whom were short of medals.

A letter was penned and sent off to His Excellency Rolando Drago Rodriguez, Chile Ambassador to the UK.

BACKGROUND

Below is a Résumé of **Chapter XV111 of "The Cruise of HMS Exeter 1936 – 1939"**

The "Terremoto" January 24th 1939 Chile

"We steamed into the harbour at Valparaiso, looking forward to a repetition of the good times that we had experienced during our first visit. We arrived during the forenoon of January 24th 1939 in company with *Ajax* and as usual many went ashore in the evening. At approximately half-past eleven, when casinos, theatres and cabarets were in full swing, those on shore felt extensive vibrations which threw the civilian population into a panic but left the sailors for the most part unperturbed.

The lack of communication between the towns of the south was causing great concern among the authorities in Santiago and rumours of a disastrous earthquake around the Concepción and Chillán area began to filter through.

The Chilean Government found that affairs were so bad that a total evacuation of the people in the wrecked districts might be necessary and so the British Ambassador offered the services of the *Exeter* and *Ajax*. At 7 a.m. the ship was at sea, steaming for Talcahuano (some 270 miles south) at twenty-two knots. Throughout the night there were preparations for the landing.

On arrival the Commodore landed, and shortly afterwards three platoons and a demolition party went ashore. The first intimation that anything untoward had taken place was the presence of cracks along the jetty where the platoons landed. Buses were waiting and these took the platoons through Talcahuano, much of which was in ruins, and on to Concepción. The only part really recognisable was the main Plaza. The streets were filled with debris that had to be cleared to get the buses through. The wooden shacks occupied by the poorer classes were untouched while the brick-built houses suffered most of all.

First aid stations and a hastily erected kitchen were to be seen in the Plaza where the majority of the homeless had gathered. A small power plant had been installed making it the only place illuminated

at night. The tremors had ruptured all the proper water supplies and the shortage of this precious liquid brought the fear of typhoid. The rush for the water-cart as soon as it made an appearance was pitiful to see. Many of the landing party offered their water that was eagerly accepted.

Notwithstanding the terrible shortage our men were offered water with which to make tea; naturally it was refused but this unselfish gesture brought lumps to many throats. During the day many mounted patrols were to be seen to prevent looting, while at Chillán a Government official announced in public that looters were to be executed on the spot.

The platoons were divided up and detailed off for various jobs, including the pulling down of dangerous structures and the digging out of the bodies of victims from among the debris. At 5.30 p.m. The Retire was sounded and the landing parties climbed wearily into the waiting buses and made their way back to Talcahuano where the *Ajax* was now at anchor having arrived during the afternoon.

By 7 p.m. the ship [Exeter] was ready to sail for Valparaiso with some 350 refugees, many of whom were British. Fortunately the weather was good and the sea calm allowing us to keep the quarter-deck awning spread for the whole trip. With curtains down each side it looked like some great marquee. Both waists and the Royal Marine mess deck were also utilised, enabling all to be, if not exactly comfortable, at least sheltered from the dangers of exposure. A thick fog during the night slowed progress, and the siren prevented a good night's sleep, arriving at 9.30 a.m.

The disembarkation of the passengers was witnessed by hundreds of people on the jetty anxious for news and loved ones. Oil-lighters came alongside and we refuelled and by 2.30 p.m. we went out into the harbour and anchored in *Ajax's* billet.

7.30 a.m. next morning the ship once more proceeded to Talcahuano and arrived there during the dog-watches [4 p.m. to 8 p.m.]. On this trip we took a lot of soldiers with us and after they had been disembarked all spaces used by the refugees were scrubbed down with disinfectant in readiness for the 600 odd expected that day. Dawn was hidden by a thick fog and it looked as if the trip to Valparaiso was going to be longer than that anticipated. Boatloads of people and baggage began to arrive alongside very early.

One girl still in her teens with a very young baby was too weak to climb the gangway but willing hands soon lifted her up and brought her inboard. The ship left promptly at 8 p.m. in order to arrive in Valparaiso that evening.

The young girl and her baby were later found sitting in a corner, dazed and very frightened. They were at once taken to the sick-bay where the Chief put the mother to bed, bathed the baby and dressed him in one of his own vests and a shirt. News of the poor mother's plight went round the ship like wildfire and she was bewildered by the number of visitors that she received. A priest who was taking passage christened the baby *Juan Exeter Cristiano* and on leaving the ship the mother was informed that the sum of thirty pounds [worth £1370 today] had been collected from among the ship's company and given to the British Consul for safe keeping to provide a weekly allowance to supplement her relief.

One pair will always be remembered: the organ-grinder and his monkey. After a long argument between the First Lieutenant and the Musician they were allowed to remain on board on condition they were both deloused. They kept both young and old amused on the quarter-deck and when mealtimes came round rations for two were issued.

During the afternoon the fog lifted allowing a substantial increase in speed and we berthed alongside in Valparaiso at about 10 p.m.

Our services were no longer required as railway services to the south had been repaired sufficiently to permit evacuation of the stricken areas by land and several merchant ships were co-operating in the evacuation. We had "done our bit" in one of the worst catastrophes that Chile has known as a Republic. It had been hard but the knowledge that it was being done for the people, long popular among visitors of the Royal Navy to South America, lightened the load considerably."

The Chilean government was extremely grateful for the prompt and effective assistance given by the South American Division and there is no doubt that this was instrumental in cementing the strong support for Britain and the Royal Navy which already existed in Chile. Commodore Harwood was awarded the Grand Cross of the Chilean Order of Merit (Gold), Captain Woodhouse of *Ajax* was

made a Commander (Silver) and another 41 officers and senior ratings were awarded the Order at Bronze level. Apparently every member of the two ships' companies received a miniature medal.

Frank Burton recanted the story of him pulling a six year old boy out of the rubble; years later in Cambridge Frank was conducting interviews at work when one candidate recognised him – the same boy! When I asked Frank if he could remember his name – Carlos Symmes, s-y-m-m-e-s. Brilliant!

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Following the letter penned to His Excellency Rolando Drago Rodriguez Ambassador of Chile it was to our great delight that the Ambassador respond enthusiastically; “... *It is with great pleasure that I offer my utmost support to the initiative ... regardless of the time that has passed deserves our highest recognition and gratitude. ... also to strengthen the long-lasting ties of two countries ...*”

Before the presentations the mystery of the lack of medal presentations was solved. Found in the archives was a newspaper cutting with, more importantly, a caption that read:

“The War arrived before the medals struck by the grateful Chilean Government were issued. Later, due mainly to the efforts of Charlie Maggs ^{Hon}Treasurer Ajax R.P.V. Assoc., they were re-struck and issued.

The press cutting dates the re-issue to about 1990 which concurs with Jim London and Ted Wicks' recollection that they received theirs in the early 90's. What probably happened was that the medals were sent to the Association who were tasked with issuing/posting to members who were in Ajax and Exeter during the earthquake. Presumably they didn't manage to get hold of everyone, including Frank & Basil, which would account for the few spares in the archives.

Having agreed with the Chilean Embassy upon 11 a.m. Friday 17th March 2017 for the presentation the hard work began. A venue close by to Frank's care home was found, a local community centre in Cambridge, invitations were sent out, Navy Media were involved, catering organised, exhibition assembled and many other tasks performed.

The big day arrived; the Ambassador arrived in good time despite having caught the train and over 40 gathered at the Community Centre to witness this rather unique occasion. Two local MPs, family members of Basil and Frank including his 6 week old great granddaughter Eleanor; an excellent turn-out of Association members including Jim London, Exeter, who had already received his medal and one of our Cruiser veterans, Mike Turner. Our Chairman Peter Danks made the long journey up from near Portsmouth but the greatest distance travelled was by Associates Richard & Lorrie Cooke, all the way from Ajax, Ontario. There was also a good turn-out of the local Royal Naval Association and other Navy representatives.

The media were well represented and the event featured on that evening's BBC TV news. Frank, the Ambassador and I were also on BBC Radio Cambridge.

I commenced proceedings by welcoming all and giving the background to the event; Peter Danks read an extract from Commodore Harwood's diary covering the earthquake. His Excellency Rolando Drago Rodriguez spoke before presenting the medals to Frank and Basil. A letter of grateful thanks from Concepción was read out and then presented to Frank and Basil. The Association presented the Ambassador with a plaque who in turn presented a wonderful book of Chilean landscapes. There then followed endless interviews. An article appeared in the April Navy News.

A wonderful time was had had by all, especially the two stars, Frank and Basil along with Jim London, all of whom are inspirational. I am very grateful, on behalf of the HMS Ajax & River Plate Veterans Association, for the splendid turn out of Association members to support the day.

Malcolm Collis

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