

Submission to Online Cenotaph, Auckland War Memorial Museum

Lieut. DOUGLAS WILLIAM BLACKLAWS RNR(NZ Division) 1903- 1941

Born 20 April 1903 Aberdeen to Georgina Hunter Blacklaws and William Blacklaws

Trained as a Cadet at Dartmouth at either or both of RN College Osborne and RN Naval College Dartmouth, entered the mercantile marine, rising to be a deck officer with navigator status. Often on the UK- India routes, presumably with P & O. In 1925, joined the Union Steam Ship Co of NZ which had been linked with P & O from 1917. He now also traversed the Tasman, as well as the trans-Pacific RMS routes linking Sydney, Auckland, Suva, Honolulu and Vancouver. RMS Aorangi and RMS Monowai feature largely on his service record. He was to be cited as a 'master mariner'.

Being astutely aware of the threat of war, he signed up for the Royal Naval Reserve (NZ Division) in 1935. He was to be mobilised in October 1939, now being trained in various courses to equip him as a wartime Royal Navy officer, and even being used to train others from the Australian services.

In Sept 1937 he had married Ruth Aline Scott, a talented much acclaimed soprano from Hamilton NZ, and a scholarship winner at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music. They were to have two children (Sonya Nina 1939 and Douglas David 1941).



In May 1941, he was brought off final leave to act as a last minute stand-in CO of HMS Puriri. It was to be under the direction of HMS Gale, for routine patrols within the Hauraki Gulf and eastern Northland waters. In June 1940, the RMS Niagara had been the victim of mines laid by the German raider HK Orion. Maritime New Zealand was on high alert.

Puriri was a newly commissioned minesweeper with the 25th Minesweeper Flotilla, out of Auckland. It was one of a number of coastal vessels formerly owned by the Anchor Shipping Co. of Nelson. Built in Edinburgh this new ship had arrived in NZ in Jan 1939, but was requisitioned by the government for Naval service in Nov 1940. It was converted with paravane gear but with limited armaments – one 4 inch cannon, and unspecified number of Lewis machine guns and depth charges – and with a cruising speed of 8.5 knots, but a presumed maximum of 10.5 knots at Speed. It had a complement of 32, including 6 officers. It was commissioned in April 1941.

In the afternoon of 13th May 1941, a fishing vessel NE of Whangarei Heads tangled its nets with what was seen to be a mine. Navy was notified, a local patrol launch despatched and 'dan buoyed the mine with a big post and flag'. Gale and Puriri were diverted to search, but could not find the buoy, neither in that late afternoon nor in the next morning of wind-driven lumpy seas and poor visibility.

At 11am on the 14th, away from the buoyed position of the previous day and without warning, the Puriri blew up, fracturing amidships and going down by the head within minutes. The crew leapt clear; 26 were rescued by Gale; 5 were lost, including Lt Douglas Blacklaws.

The site of the mining in 1941 was not found until 1991, when a Remote Observation Vehicle (ROV) found the Puriri wreckage about 90 metres down. It was featured in the New Zealand Herald. The newly distressed widow of Douglas Blacklaws wanted no further family research. Not until 2006 were her ashes laid above the wreck site in a private gesture of love and respect.

At 11am on the 14th of May 2011, 70 years to the day and hour of the mining, a columnar memorial was unveiled at Ocean Beach, Whangarei by the Chief of NZ Navy, in the presence of the national President of the RSA, local officials, a large turnout of Northland RSA members, a gathering in excess of 150. These included Puriri's only surviving crew member from Motueka. Wreaths were laid, speeches made as part of the commemoration, honouring



... the lives lost in performance of duty and the lasting impact on their families
... the undoubted service of NZ Minesweepers
... WWII's only Naval loss in NZ waters

Three months later, RNZN's survey vessel Resolution was to apply newly installed deep sea search equipment to the site of the Puriri's wreckage.

An invitation was offered to a lay group - the Blacklaws clan, local RSA officers, the media, the owner of the ROV - to observe the search, and to observe and even record the finding of the wreckage on a shoal 98 metres below, with newly defined coordinates. It was in fact an undeclared war grave.

A short Ship's Parade, and the laying of a wreath above the site by Sonya, the late CO's daughter, confirmed the commitment of the Navy itself and its recognition of the communal effort to commemorate these losses incurred in WWII. It was a memorable denouement for all who had been involved and for all those honoured.

This Memorial was again in focus during the 75th Anniversary of the Royal New Zealand Navy in 2016

Submitted on behalf of Mrs Ruth Blacklaws (1905-94)
and her families in NZ and England
- by Ian V Sage (Son-in-law)