

# H.M.S. CALEDONIA'S FINAL REUNION

BY

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It was left to a master-at-arms to sum up the situation, though whether his remarks were meant as the ultimate compliment or a stinging rebuke has been lost in the mists of time. MAA Turnbull's actual comment was 'You can take the Tiff out of *Caledonia* but not *Caledonia* out of the Tiff' and this was put to the test on 4 August 1984, during the final reunion.



FIG. 1—REAR-ADMIRAL J. C. WARSOP INSPECTING DIVISIONS, 4 AUGUST 1984

Apprentice training at Caledonia does not end until December 1985, but the reunion took place while the numbers were still reasonably large. Artificers past and present, together with former members of staff and ship's company, came together on a day universally regarded as being a great success. They came from all corners of the globe, including such distant outposts as the U.S.A., New Zealand, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, and Spain. Many had left the Navy and gone on to further success and the 'old boys' included 152 still involved in engineering, 23 educationalists, 13 company directors, 13 now self-employed, 15 in electronics and computing, 5 in offshore oil, and one senior officer in the Salvation Army. Many, though, were still serving, and their success within the Royal Navy must be judged on the very high proportion of engineer officers whose roots are at H.M.S. *Caledonia*.

When *Caledonia* reaches the end of its relatively short life as a training establishment—from 1937 to 1985—over 16 000 artificer apprentices will have passed through its gates. At the Reunion it seemed as though the majority of them had returned, although a rough count proved that a more modest, but nevertheless impressive, 1000 had actually come. Together with wives, families, and current ‘Caledonians’, the attendance was well over 1600. Accommodating all visitors was impossible but the problem was solved by turning the sports field into a temporary campsite. The success of this idea was proved by many, clearly hardened by successful expeds, staying in camp for the whole weekend.

A reunion does not simply happen. Planning had to be started well in advance with the formation of a committee whose aim was to conceive, plan, and execute the entire Reunion. Several ex-‘Caledonians’ were co-opted on to this committee, including Lionel Henderson, one of the initial entry in 1937 and now Senior Civilian Instructor Officer in the workshops.

From inception, it was clear that publicizing the Reunion was going to be a major problem. *Caledonia* produced a variety of posters which were despatched to MOD, ships, naval bases, shore establishments, and R.N.R. units. In addition, advertisements were placed in several national daily papers, local papers in naval areas, and in Navy News. The response from this effort was surprisingly poor, but those who saw the notices quickly spread the word throughout the country and around the world.

The planning and scheduling of events took a considerable time, but eventually a suitable programme of entertainment was agreed, guests were invited, and food and drink ordered. Included with the invitations were accommodation lists, route maps, and parking permits, as well as colour-coded name tallies which identified guests within specific five year periods and aided them in recognizing others from their own era.

When the great day dawned it was clear that the gods had granted the request for excellent weather. A slight shower heralded the opening of the gates at 1300 but it was dry when proceedings began with Ceremonial Divisions. Captain Alan Sturgeon, the Captain of *Caledonia*, introduced the guest of honour, Rear-Admiral J. C. Warsop, C.B., who is the senior serving ex-*Caledonia* apprentice, and also three other ex-*Caledonia* apprentices who have become rear-admirals, M. H. Griffin, H. L. O. Thompson, and J. Burgess. Captain Sturgeon went on to welcome the most senior guest, Vice-Admiral Sir George Raper, K.C.B., who had been Captain of *Caledonia* from 1959 to 1961. Several other former Captains also attended, including Captain R. H. P. Elvin (1961–1962), Captain W. G. McC. Burn (1969–1971), Captain C. C. Loxton (1976–1978), and Captain S. G. Morgan (1978–1980).

After Divisions, there were displays to be seen on the Boiler House Lawn, in the workshops, and in the swimming pool. Seating such large numbers was difficult and was solved by borrowing a bank of tiered seating from H.M.S. *Excellent*. From this guests were able to view the expertise of the High Box Display Team and of the Motor Cycle Club. For the latter, MEA/A Jessep gave a fine display of stunt riding including several jumps over fellow apprentices. Four teams of apprentices and divisional staff revealed the skills developed on Resource and Initiative Training by taking part in a ‘field gun’ style competition across a variety of obstacles.

There were many other forms of distraction to be found around the establishment including a souvenir shop (selling books, ties, photographs, and crested clothing) and the archive records. However, many visitors preferred to walk through the grounds which had been immaculately prepared by Bob McNaughton, a gardener in *Caledonia* for over 25 years. All *Caledonia* clubs put on displays which were well attended and drew considerable interest. Tea was available at various points and from early evening

there were bars in the 'Chippie's Shop' and 'ERA's End'.

Several classes attended as groups, making a weekend of the occasion and spending considerable time catching up with news and recalling tales of *Caledonia* and their naval careers. Those who came individually soon found old friends, and small groups of ex-colleagues quickly formed in every part of the establishment. Many of the wives present had met their husbands whilst they were under training at *Caledonia*. All these couples told similar stories of escape and evasion in order to be together as the regulations were very strict in those days. One couple of note was Ron and Christine Bailey who were about to celebrate their Silver Wedding Anniversary, having travelled from New Zealand. They had married while he was a New Zealand ERA apprentice under training and had not returned to U.K. since.

The major event of the evening was the Reunion March Past, followed by Beat Retreat and Ceremonial Sunset. Platoons were colour coded in a similar manner to the name tallies, and marched past Admiral Raper in excellent style, proving that marching, once learned, is never forgotten. The Volunteer Band, whose worthy efforts throughout the day deserve a special mention, then Beat Retreat, and Dougie Brown, the instructor of the now defunct Pipe Band, played a lament as the ensign was lowered.

Whilst there is no doubt that the day belonged to the apprentices of old, visitors expressed high praise for the present apprentices who were felt to be 'nearly as good' as they themselves had been! High praise indeed.

As a result of the Reunion, the Ex-Caledonia Artificer Apprentices Association has found a resurgence of vitality, with many meetings and activities planned. This was greatly helped by a decision of the Association to open up the membership to all ex-'Caledonians'. Rumours already exist about a Golden Jubilee Reunion in 1987.

There is a postscript worth mentioning. A letter was received some months later from Dunfermline, some two miles from the establishment: 'Would it not be a good idea,' asked the ingenuous enquirer, 'since *Caledonia* is closing down, to have a Reunion'!



FIG. 2—REAR-ADMIRAL WARSOP AND  
MEA/A D. A. Pratt