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‘Swift and selfless endeavours’ at sea honoured after 54 years

Scrolls for four Naval Service crew who saved lives after explosion on LÉ Cliona in 1962

Lorna Siggins



Able stoker Bill Mynes, 73, with his granddaughter Shona at Thursday's ceremony. Photograph: Brian Lawless/PA

Four Naval Service crew who saved up to 100 lives on board a patrol ship that caught fire off the south coast have been given military honours – more than half a century after the event.

Cdr Pat O'Mahony (86), able stoker Bill Mynes (73) and chief engine room artificer Maurice "Mossie" Egan (84) had to wait 54 years for their actions to be recognised by the military authorities.

The family of the late chief stoker Gerry O'Callaghan was also given a scroll of commendation by Minister of State with special responsibility for defence Paul Kehoe at a ceremony on the patrol ship LÉ *Niamh* in Dublin on Thursday.

Mr Kehoe said that each of the four men “fearlessly faced difficulty, danger and pain” in successfully extinguishing the fire, and their “swift and selfless endeavours” ensured that “tragedy was avoided and not a single life was lost”.

A group of journalists, including an RTÉ television news and camera crew, were on board the corvette when the fire occurred after a depth charge exploded prematurely on May 29th, 1962. The corvette was off Roche’s Point on an anti-submarine training exercise.

The explosion lifted the ship out of the water and sparked a fire in the boiler room. Able stoker Mynes managed to switch off the fuel supply and assist two junior stokers out, while Lieut O’Mahony, then ship’s executive officer, took a hose down to the boiler room to contain the fire.

Burns

Able stoker Mynes sustained burns to his face and arms, and he and several crew were taken by ambulance to hospital after the ship’s captain, Lieut Cdr Harry Henry, took the LÉ *Cliona* back to shore, having refused assistance from a tug.

Photographer Liam Kennedy, who was standing in for his father to record the training exercise, caught the depth charge explosion.

His photos appeared on the front pages of several newspapers the next day. “All I was worried about was keeping my film dry,” said Mr Kennedy, whose 73rd birthday was yesterday.

“There was no panic, we were all given lifejackets, and were told to move from where we were on the deck as we were standing over the ship’s magazine. I wondered why the rescue services were standing off some distance from the ship, and realised afterwards it was due to the risk of explosion.

“There was such training, discipline and bravery, and Lieut Cdr Henry even gave me a brandy on the bridge before we reached shore,” Mr Kennedy added. “The ship was listing at a 60-degree angle by the time we reached Cobh.”

The men were not eligible for distinguished service medals as they had not been recommended for an honour by the military within four years of the incident.

Following a review involving former minister for defence Simon Coveney, the letters of commendation were issued. “Tháinig ár lá . . . better late than never,” Cdr O’Mahony, then a lieutenant, joked afterwards.

Mr Kehoe said a plaque to the crew of the LÉ *Cliona* would be unveiled at the naval base in Haulbowline, Co Cork, later this month.