

## **An Englishman's View of Wilhelmshaven.**

Tony Colvin is a true Brit, and yet a kind of foster-son of our city. He feels close links to Wilhelmshaven through having been a pupil at Prince Rupert School in the Banter Kaserne, where before his time the worst enemies of the British Empire were stationed and trained: German U-Boat crews. When Tony previously came here to research the past, he was saddened to see first the neglect and then the demolition of the buildings in which he and his school friends, dressed in dark blue blazers and ties, had often groaned under the discipline of the British educational system whilst also benefiting from the intellectual development that it provided. And now we can see the result of the research that grew from these connections, in an all-embracing and richly-illustrated 41-page article published in the English-language magazine 'After The Battle', which with care and conscientiousness covers the history of Wilhelmshaven from its foundation up to the years of rebuilding after WWII.

'After The Battle' is in its 35<sup>th</sup> year of publication. It selects notable scenes of recent history and compares photographs of how they looked then with how they are now. Often, but not always, the articles are about military events, battles etc., but some cover topics such as German espionage in England (Hans Lody! Issue 11), the death of the Polish General Sikorski (Issue 20), which was also the subject of a play by Rolf Hochhuth, the assassination of the SD chief Reinhard Heydrich in Prague organised by the British Secret Service (Issue 24), the liberation of Bergen-Belsen concentration camp (Issue 89), and the mass murder at Katyn (Issue 92).

The latest is Issue 148 which also covers German air raid damage in the port city of Liverpool. There devastation similar to that in Wilhelmshaven resulted in a greater loss of life than Wilhelmshaven suffered, which should give those who lived through the air raids here cause for reflection. Following this article is one on the fate of the Russian soldiers who raised the victory banner above the grimly contested Reichstag building in Berlin. (There were several banners and the actual event took place at night without photographers present, so the well-known pictures were taken during a re-enactment. The person who actually raised the banner first, Sgt Minin, had to wait until 1995 to be officially recognised).

Colvin's coverage of Wilhelmshaven's history from its founding until the Tirpitz era is brief and to the point, and naturally what he says is not new to Wilhelmshaveners. Here and there his emphasis differs from what we are used to; for example the significance of the Fliegerdeich as a base for marine aviation, which strangely is hardly ever recalled in our local history even though seaplanes were built in the dockyard where altogether 21,000 were employed in 1918! He emphasises Wilhelmshaven's technological significance by giving as examples the 40,000 ton floating dry-dock, the 250-ton floating crane, 'Langer Heinrich' which is still working today in Genoa, and naturally the K-W Bridge.

Hitler's election campaigns in the region, during which he stayed in Horumersiel at the Hotel "Zur Schönen Aussicht" (owned by a war comrade, although Colvin does not say so) were successful when Oldenburg elected Carl Röver as Ministerpresident as early as 1933. Colvin details Hitler's plans for the Navy and their fulfilment in Wilhelmshaven with the building of the battleships 'Scharnhorst' and 'Tirpitz', one of six H-Class super-battleships of 62,000 tons that were planned, and with the rebuilding and improvement of the Naval air station and U-Boat base. The Bontekai is pictured earlier when closely packed with new destroyers and now totally empty except for small museum ships. The specialist literature disputes Colvin's assertion that the battleship projects covering H41 (97,000 tons) to H44 (139,000 tons) were seriously intended. They were under construction until 1941 when U-boats received absolute priority, consigning plans for building this size of ship to the dustbin. There may, however, have been projects to study the implication of armouring decks that would be proof against large future aircraft bombs. (Gröner/Jung/Maaß, 1989).

The author goes into great detail about the air war against Wilhelmshaven, clearly showing that despite 5,668 bombing sorties and the dropping of nearly 20,000 tons of bombs, the Allied campaign failed because their losses of 146 mostly four-engined bombers and 856 crew were higher than German losses on the ground which Colvin quotes as 452 dead and 1,125 wounded. In fact the number on the German side of shot-down and killed airmen is missing from the above numbers due to the senseless destruction of Luftwaffe records at the end of the war. Colvin's judgement that dockyard production was never disrupted for more than an hour at a time is too generous to the defence. During numerous air alarms usually lasting far more than an hour, the workers sat in the bunkers that were built in and around the dockyard in order to avoid the loss of their irreplaceable specialist skills. No work was possible, of course, during these periods.

A good quarter of the article is devoted to the surrender, occupation and garrisoning of Wilhelmshaven, and here even someone who considers himself knowledgeable has a lot to learn. How was it exactly that Polish troops took the surrender of Wilhelmshaven when the British after all their effort and sacrifices should have taken precedence? The background is detailed by Colvin and is apparently based on Canadian and British sources which unfortunately are not referenced. This is in accordance with the non-academic character of the magazine which does not quote sources. Names such as those of the Polish Brig. Grudzinski and the British Capt. Conder are recalled. Extreme plans for demolishing Wilhelmshaven or submerging it after evacuating the population met with protests on humanitarian grounds in England, to the Royal Navy's regret.

Tony's final words relate to his old Prince Rupert School. His high standards bring it honour. One could emphasise the excellent illustrations, but relying on them to tell the story would be like snacking – it doesn't satisfy! All things considered, Tony Colvin has delivered a weighty contribution to the written history of Wilhelmshaven.

I recommend that those interested in buying a copy of After The Battle Issue 148 should do so in a bookshop

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Price: £4.25 (excluding delivery)

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