

# H.M.S. EXETER — PAST AND PRESENT

**David Taylor looks at the history of the British Destroyer, recently returned from the Falklands.**

An account of *Exeter's* homecoming from the Falklands can be found elsewhere in AIRFIX magazine. Yet the ship's history is not without interest to naval modellers: this is the fifth vessel to have borne the name and its predecessors have performed a notable role in a variety of naval campaigns over the last three centuries.

The first *Exeter* was a 3rd rate of 70 guns built at the Blackwall Yard of Sir Henry Johnson and launched in 1680. By contemporary standards its dimensions seem meagre: a keel of 124 feet, a beam of 40 feet. Its displacement was 1,070 tons and the ship's complement varied from between 300 to 450 men. It came into service when England's natural maritime enemy was — as it was to be for many years subsequently — the French and made its first appearance in the French Wars of the reign of William and Mary. *Exeter* fought in the battle off Beachy Head in June 1690. However, its eventual demise was not a consequence of battle. Damaged by an explosion at Plymouth on 12 September 1691 it lingered on, unrepaired, in the dockyards until finally classified as a hulk in 1697.

As a means of replacing her a 4th rate of 60 guns was built at the Portsmouth dockyards and launched on 26 May 1697. The second *Exeter's* dimensions were marginally smaller: a keel of 122 feet, a beam of 38. The ship displaced 949 tons: its complement assumed a more constant figure of 364 men. A subsequent rebuilding programme in the 18th century led to an increase both in size and crew. *Exeter* was now destined for Atlantic service, an important role in the continuing naval struggle against the French. In March 1702 she was despatched from Plymouth to Newfoundland — part of a squadron whose objective was to protect trade routes and to harry the enemy. The ship's performance was nothing short of remarkable. In the first month the squadron took 29 prizes, 8 of which were the responsibility of *Exeter*. The ship's captain, John Leake — an unfortunate name, perhaps, for a sailor — then sailed home to Portsmouth with 16 prizes where he was elevated to the status of Rear Admiral by Queen Anne.

The French wars continued. In 1711 *Exeter* was sent to the Mediterranean where its task was to engage the French fleet in the Gulf of Geneva. Some years of the early part of the 18th century were given over to reconstruction, but in 1744 came an expedition to Quiberon Bay whose highlight was the driving ashore and burning of the 64 gun French *Ardent* in October 1748. But *Exeter* was growing old, despite her continuing



*Exeter* moored next to H.M.S. *Belfast*. (M. French)

service in South-east India (she served in 1748 at the siege of Pondicherry). In 1763 it was decided that she should be broken up but immediately replaced.

The third *Exeter* was a 3rd rate of 64 guns, built at Chatham and launched on 26 July 1763. It was slightly larger than its predecessors: keel 129 feet, beam 44. It displaced 1,340 tons and the ship's complement was, approximately, 500. Again, the principal enemy was the French, most notably at the battle of Ushant in July 1788 and during the Indian operations of 1779-83. Here the ship won her first battle honours of Sadras, Providien, Negapatnam and Trincomalee. An incident that occurred during the battle of Sadras provides an interesting sidelight on prevailing ideas of military honour. At one stage *Exeter* was attacked by three French ships, causing the Navigating Officer to demand of the Commodore: 'What is to be done?' The answer was: 'There is nothing to be done but fight her till she sinks'. Yet, despite the loss of her captain, the ship survived. Following battles, however, rendered her unseaworthy, certainly unable to return to England. She was condemned and destroyed by burning off the Cape of Good Hope in February 1784.

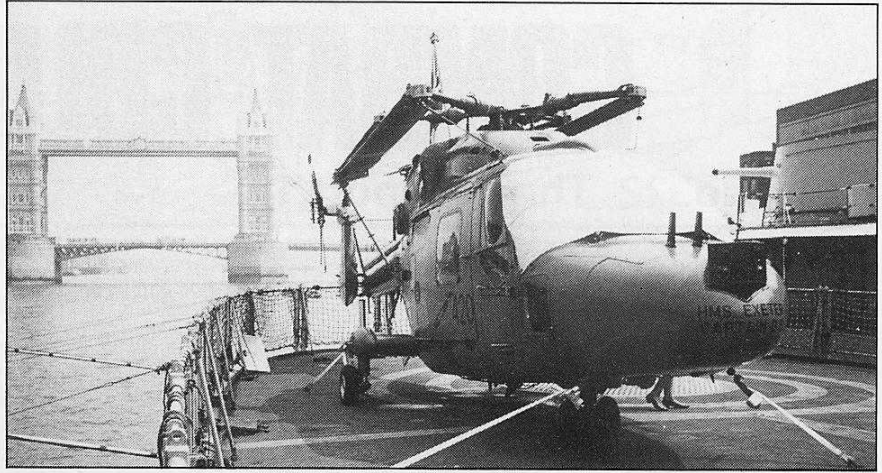
Thereafter, the name lapsed for nearly a century and a half. The 4th *Exeter* was built at Devonport and launched in 1929. Her

length, between perpendiculars, increased to 540 feet, the beam to 57 feet. She displaced 8,400 tons and accommodated a crew of 600 to 630 men. Ten years later the ship was involved in one of the most famous naval engagements of the Second World War: the Battle of the River Plate, 13 December 1939, which resulted in the sinking of the German battleship Graf Spee. Here *Exeter* gained her 5th battle honours, but in the process sustained enormous losses: 61 officers and men were killed. She limped back on the 1,200 mile journey to the Falkland Islands on 16 December, where the crew tried to make the ship ready for sea. Rumour had it that *Exeter* would be abandoned as a rusting hulk, but its case was espoused by Winston Churchill — then at the Admiralty — who wrote long afterwards that 'he was most anxious about the *Exeter* and would not accept proposals made to leave her unrepaired in the Falkland Islands until the end of the war'. Consequently, on 14th February 1940 she sailed into the Plymouth Sound to an enormous welcome from the mass of onlookers on the Hoe — including the men who had built her — and to a personal welcome from Winston Churchill.

Refitting was followed by patrol and troop convoy work before *Exeter* was dispatched to Singapore to join the *Prince of Wales* and the *Repulse*, the idea being that they should

operate as a combined force seeking to destroy enemy transporters approaching Sunda. These operations reached their apogee at the Battle of the Java Sea (1 March 1942) where the ship was sunk by the Japanese — or rather, not quite sunk. Realising that it was no longer possible to save his ship Captain Gordon ordered flooding valves and seacocks to be opened, small charges in the shaft passages to be exploded and the order 'Abandon Ship' to be given. Ironically, at one stage a salvo seemed to be passing over the ship until one dud shell dropped out of the sky and hit the *Exeter's* deck with devastating effect. When the base plate of the shell was retrieved from the furnace of B1 boiler it was found to bear the message 'VICKERS 1924'.

The present *Exeter* was launched at the



Neptune Yard, Wallsend in April 1978, underwent sea trials in the early part of 1980 and was finally commissioned on 19 September 1980. A full list of relevant details can be found elsewhere. A bare 20 months after commission she was one of the first ships to join the Task Force assembled for 'Operation Corporate' — the liberation of the Falkland Islands — the second connexion with that part of the South Atlantic. She passed latitude 35° S, which marks the beginning of the Argentine coast line, on 19 May 1982, in time to participate in covering the vital disembarkation of the 5th infantry brigade on 1 June, a preliminary move in the establishment of the beachhead for the advance on Port Stanley. This was an extremely difficult operation, carried out in atrocious weather conditions, but despite the bad weather her Lynx helicopter flew several vital missions. By night the *Exeter* was one of those warships which moved closer inshore under cover of darkness to bombard selected targets on the approaches to and around Port Stanley.

During the week beginning 6 June she scored her first personal victory when an Argentinian but British-built Canberra jet-bomber was destroyed by one of her sea dart missiles. Other kills followed during engagements when determined attacks by aircraft, some of them armed with Exocet missiles, had to be beaten off.

## HMS EXETER — DETAILS.

- Displacement : 3,800 tons.
- Length : 412 feet.
- Beam : 47 feet.
- Propulsion : 2 Rolls Royce OLYMPUS Gas Turbines developing 25,000 SHP each. The ship has COGOG arrangement (combining gas or gas) which means that when only cruising power is required the TYNE gas turbines, 4,800 SHP, drive the two shafts and variable pitch propellers, giving a maximum speed of 18 knots. When speeds greater than this are required the OLYMPUS gas turbines are used and the TYNE's switched to stand-by. Maximum speed 30 knots.
- Armament : 1 Twin Launcher for Sea Dart.  
1 Vickers 4.5" Mk 8 Automatic Gun Mounting.  
2 20mm Oerlikon guns.  
2 Triple launchers for anti-submarine torpedoes.
- Helicopter : 1 LYNX HAS Mk II armed with anti-ship missiles or anti-submarine torpedoes.
- Complement : Officers 26.  
Senior Ratings 81.  
Junior Ratings 194.

*Photos: on board the present Exeter. (D. F. Tooke)*

