

Parading the PWSTS Standard in Ocracoke /Buxton NC USA 11/12 May 2017

The PWSTS Standard was successfully paraded at two local commemorative services to British seamen at Ocracoke and Buxton, North Carolina, USA on 11th and 12th May, 2017 and was pleasantly welcomed by all although, not unexpectedly, with a little puzzlement too as to why as it was a long way from home. However, I was given every encouragement to join both ceremonies and thoroughly welcomed to participate in the services at both locations and enjoyed wonderful hospitality from all.

My original aim was only to attend the Ocracoke service of remembrance to the lost crew of HMT *Bedfordshire*, being one of the Royal Naval Patrol Service's anti-submarine trawlers sent to the east coast of America in 1942 to protect the merchant vessels heading north along that coast to form the Atlantic convoys at Halifax, Nova Scotia, but I soon discovered that nearby at Buxton, Cape Hatteras there was another small cemetery containing just two graves, one an unknown seaman and the other, 4th Engineer Michael Cairns of the *San Delfino*, a British tanker carrying aviation fuel that was torpedoed and sunk at the end of April, 1942 that, being specifically MN, I felt I must visit.

Here I intended to lay one of the two wreathes brought from England and expected to do this quietly on my own but discovered that the day before the ceremony at Ocracoke an official service was also being held at Buxton so I travelled back a few miles for that. It was too late to contact the organisers so I travelled up early on the day, 11th May, via road and ferry, to discuss the matter with the Parade Marshall prior to commencement and was graciously allowed to join the service using my experience to do the necessary as and when. There was no parade as such but everyone formed up adjacent the white picket fence surrounding the two graves in the grounds of Hatteras Lighthouse, with a small contingent of the US Coastguard forming a Guard of Honour accompanied by their own USCG pipe band marching on just a few yards. The service was similar to those in England except for the playing of Taps instead of our Last Post, the firing of a volley by the Guard of Honour followed by the playing of Amazing Grace by the pipe band which suited the occasion very well. Mercifully the service was of reasonable length as it was 95F with glaring light and high humidity with not much shade so that the buffet reception held in the Graveyard of the Atlantic Museum immediately following was a relief to all.

At Ocracoke the next day, 12th, slightly cooler at 85+ degrees, the service took similar form, again with the USCG providing the Guard of Honour plus the pipe band, with again no parade due to limitations of space although on this occasion for the first time the very capable organisers introduced the Last Post and two minutes silence in honour and respect, plus pronouncing 'lieutenant' the English way when, as part of the service, two local high school students read out the 37 names of all those lost when HMT *Bedfordshire* was torpedoed. Also in attendance were representatives from the British Embassy, British Royal Navy, the Canadian Embassy, the Royal Canadian Navy, the US National Park Service and representatives of both the American and British Riders Associations, with the Guest of Honour at both locations being Lt Tom Cunningham RNR Ret, who was born a few months after his father, Sub Lt Tom Cunningham perished aboard HMT *Bedfordshire* and is buried here, one of only two known graves of the four contained within the British Cemetery, Ocracoke, in land donated and bought for one dollar in perpetuity by the British government. It must be said that Ocracoke does not have a communal cemetery but several private ones belonging to the families that founded the village and it was the Wahab/Williams families that kindly allowed a corner of their own plot to be used to give proper burials to the only four of the 37 crew that were recovered in the days following the sinking, the remainder never being found. Four stone crosses were made by a local company and only substituted for the more usual British headstones when the Commonwealth War Graves Commission took responsibility much later.

The event was very well supported, as it is every year, with a large crowd filling the rather restricted area as homes and roads are in close proximity, so close that the owner of a nearby property had no qualms in cutting back the branches of a tree that had begun to overgrow the cemetery flagpole. I had taken not only a wreath representing PWSTS but also one from my local Royal Naval Association to which I belong and these were placed by two local residents on our behalf with one young lady commenting that she "had never been so terrified in all her life" but they carried it off very well. A substantial buffet reception provided by the local inhabitants was very well received at the Community Hall following the cemetery gathering and an article later appeared in the local newspaper describing the events.

All in all a worthwhile trip that I was proud to undertake.



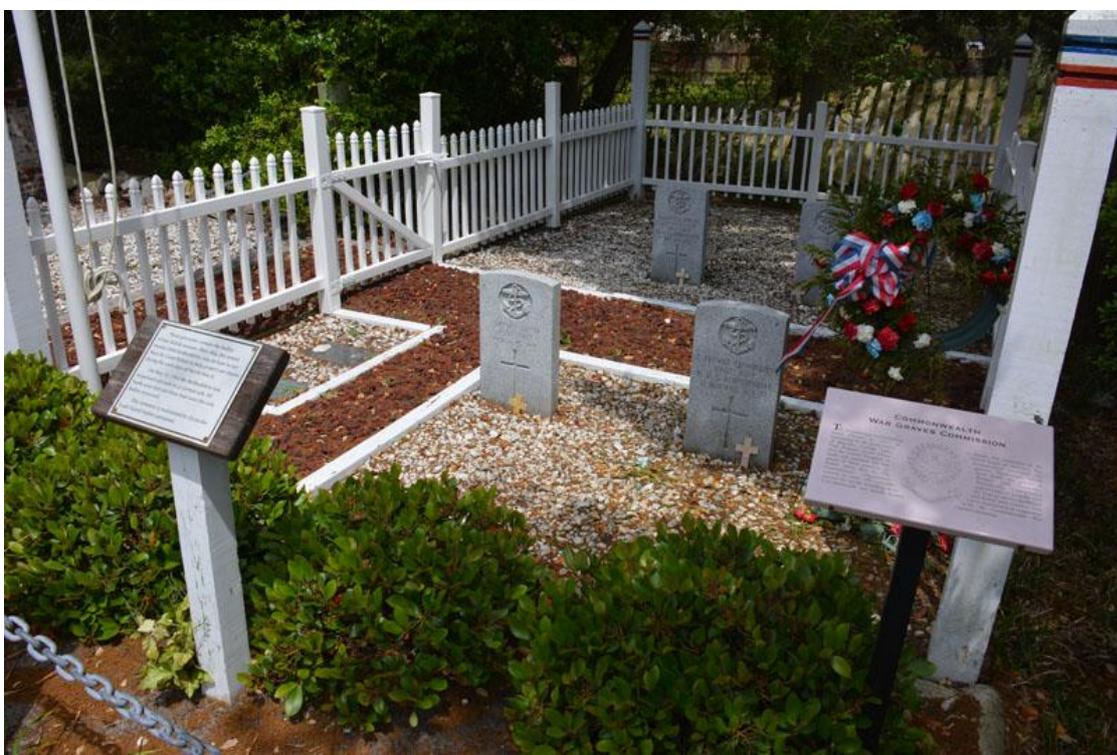
Cape Hatteras on the Outer Banks is one of the most dangerous places on the east coast and shipping is alerted by numerous lighthouses, still lit in the early days of WW2.

(Bye the bye, in 1990 due to erosion the Cape Hatteras light

was in danger of falling into the sea, so how do you move a lighthouse weighing 4,900 tons, dismantle it brick by brick? No, they jacked it up onto a low-loader and drove it a quarter mile inland to re-site it. Only in America.)



Stone crosses made locally that replaced original wooden ones placed in 1942.



These stone crosses were in turn replaced as head-stones when the British Cemetery came under Commonwealth War Graves Commission jurisdiction.



Third from left is Lt Tom Cunningham RNVR Ret whose father Sub Lt Tom Cunningham was a crew member of HMT Bedfordshire and is buried here.

First left is a student of the local high school that as part of the ceremony read out the 37 names of all crew members lost in the sinking.

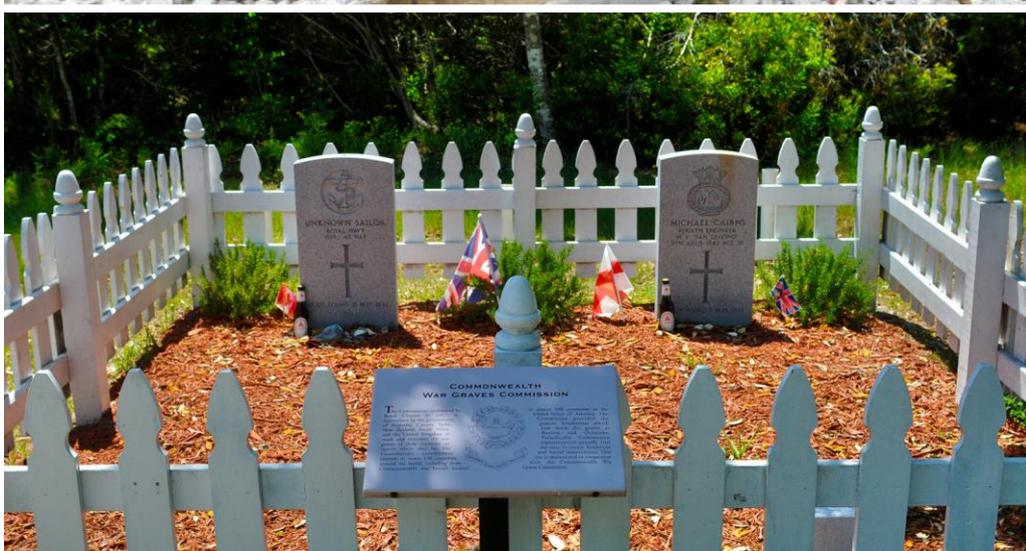
Cemetery is now cared for by the local community, not the USCG. Signs to be amended.



Far right is PWSTS wreath carried from England representing all MN personnel.

Centre wreath from British and American Legion Riders Assoc.

Left wreath from Bromley Royal Naval Association.



Buxton cemetery, Hatteras, containing one unknown seaman and 4th Engineer Michael Cairns of the *San Delfino*.