

How the Hermes Association started, as told by Julie Kirkpatrick Granddaughter of Hermes 9 Survivor Edward Nelson- Girtchen Snr

On a Summer's Day in 1987, my Granddad, prompted by my Mum, started talking about being sunk by the Japanese from HMS Hermes on the 9th of April in 1942 off Trincomalee (then Ceylon) and being rescued by the hospital ship Vita. This was 44 years since the sinking, no one in the family had heard his story before not even his wife my grandma.

My parents and Grandma Cath listened intently. It had taken him over 4 decades to talk about the sinking of Hermes 9 in 1942. He spoke about swimming for his life in the sea, being able to see a pilot's face as the planes swooped so low firing at them in the water. He said one pilot saw him and did not fire. Only being nineteen at the time he could just remember this and swimming for his life. Emotionally he said to my dad he just wanted to know if there were any other survivors as he wanted to remember friends he had lost. He did not want to forget the men who never returned and whilst he had swum for his life, he had never stopped thinking about those who did not return and felt incredibly guilty for surviving. There were no names he could remember but my dad being ex Royal Navy said he would do his utmost to help and make my Granddad's wish come true. As a family we were filled with wonder, questions, and absolute disbelief at how he had remained silent all this time. The quest for a Hermes 9 reunion and the history of the sinking of the ship began.

An advert was soon placed in the Navy News and within days my parents and grandparents, were inundated with personal letters and stories. An emotional first reunion of 32 Hermes 9 survivors, fourteen wives and three widows was held in the Union Jack club in October 1987. Steered by our Vice President at the time my dad Ted Girtchen and assisted by my Mum and Grandma, the next reunion was planned, and it was agreed it would be an annual event always to coincide with as near as possible to the 9th April as remembrance was at the heart of my Granddad's wish. It was so heartbreaking when my Granddad passed away in February 1988 having only been able to attend this first reunion. Now more than ever the family had a real focus to honour and keep his and so many other Hermes 9 memories alive. At one reunion, not long before my grandma passed away, she said to me "never let them forget how this all started with your Granddad's story, promise me you will."

In 1989 Hermes 10 members were invited to join. At this time the gentlemen were unsure if they could join the association and I'll always remember my dad welcoming H10 members with open arms, many of whom had served in the Falklands, he felt the joining of H9 survivors and H10 members would keep the Hermes memories alive for generations to come. How right he was.

So much has happened since then that it is impossible to record or document it all here. What is at the heart of every Hermes family association reunion is friendship, love, and remembrance. I am so proud of my dad Ted and Mum Ann who worked so hard to grow the association in the early years along with my grandma, assisted then by a committee who devoted so much time and energy to bring the association to where it is today. It is fair to say none of this would have happened had my Granddad not said it would be good to remember shipmates who were lost and try to meet any survivors. Equally though we would not be here today without the true dedication of past and present Chairpersons, Presidents and Vice Presidents, Treasurer's, Secretaries and all who work behind the scenes to keep the association strong, welcoming, and up to date. There are no words that can express how grateful we are as a family for this and how proud I know my dad, Granddad and Grandma would be that the memories are still coming and being kept alive.

It is more than appreciated and again there are no words or action I can take to show our gratitude as a family. This really is a team Hermes effort by everyone connected to the ship. My Dad also ex RN never tried to attend any of this own ship reunions or contact past shipmates, when asked about this, he said “your Grandad’s story and reunions are enough for me.” Till he passed away in 2011, my dad devoted his time and energy to the Hermes family to grow the association and to honour the men of Hermes 9 plus past conflicts attending the Falklands Pangbourne service every year he could. He was my rock and inspiration, and we miss him so much as a family every day but keep his memory alive within the Hermes Association.

Julie Kirkpatrick nee Girtchen

Granddaughter of Ted Girtchen (Hermes 9 survivor) and Dad, also Ted Girtchen (ex-Royal Navy) founder member of the Hermes Association.

