



Briefing for the Public Petitions Committee

Petition Number: [PE1312](#)

Main Petitioner: William Leitch

Subject: Investigation into the award of medals for the 1949 Yangtze incident

Calls on the Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to make representations to the UK Government asking it to investigate the circumstances into the process for awarding medals to those involved in the 1949 Yangtze campaign and, in particular, whether this process was corrupted as a result of the exclusion of relevant and important documents relating to the role of HMS Concord in the Yangtze Campaign on 30 and 31 July 1949.

Background

In July 1949, during the Chinese civil war, the Royal Navy frigate HMS Amethyst carried out a daring escape after three months' incarceration by communist forces on the Yangtze River. In recognition of this action, the officers and ship's company of HMS Amethyst, together with those who served on three other RN ships which took part in the early stages of the incident – HM Ships Consort, Black Swan and London, were awarded the 'Yangtze 1949' clasp to the Naval General Service Medal (NGSM) 1915¹.

The qualifying dates for the award are:

Campaign	Number of qualifying days	From	To
Yangtze	1		
HMS Consort		20 April 1949	20 April 1949
HMS London		21 April 1949	21 April 1949
HMS Black Swan		21 April 1949	21 April 1949
HMS Amethyst		21 April 1949*	31 July 1949

Reference: House of Commons Hansard, Written Answers 27 Apr 2006: Column 1272W *Note – This date appears to be an error and should read 20 April 1949.

Personnel serving on any of these ships for a minimum of one day during the qualifying periods stated would qualify for this award. In addition, a number of RAF personnel who flew missions related to this incident were also awarded the 1949 Yangtze Medal.

¹ The Yangtze 1949 clasp was instituted in November 1949. Note that the NGSM is not awarded on its own but only when an individual first qualifies for a clasp.

Campaign for award of medal to ship's company of HMS Concord

The Petitioner believes that the officers and ship's company of another RN ship, the destroyer HMS Concord, have been unfairly denied the same decoration. The Petitioner states that the reason those who served onboard HMS Concord have not been recognised for their part in the Yangtze incident is that the British Government of the time did not want it known that HMS Concord was sent into Chinese territorial waters to aid HMS Amethyst's escape. In a [press release](#) (February 2009) the HMS Concord Association says that the order to HMS Concord to proceed into Chinese waters was given by the Commander in Chief Far East Station, Admiral Sir Patrick Brind, without reference to either the Admiralty or the Foreign Office. The HMS Consort Association on its [website](#), refutes the official position that HMS Amethyst escaped unaided and cites a systematic cover-up to expunge the role of HMS Concord in the escape.

The Petitioner and the HMS Concord Association, among others, have been campaigning to have the Naval General Service Medal (Yangtze 1949) awarded to the survivors or families of those who served on HMS Concord on 31 July 1949. The Petitioner has also sent a petition, in similar terms to his MP, Jim Devine for submission to the House of Commons. It is not clear whether this petition has been formally submitted.

In October 2007, Mr Devine wrote to the Ministry of Defence receiving [a reply](#) from the Minister of State for the Armed Forces, Mr Bob Ainsworth MP in November that year. In his reply, Mr Ainsworth quotes from HMS Concord's ship's log to show that by the time HMS Amethyst reached the Concord's position at the mouth of the Yangtze river, the Amethyst had already escaped and neither ship was then in any danger. Mr Ainsworth goes on to say that those responsible for establishing the ships and personnel to qualify for this award (the predecessor of the Committee on the Grant of Honours Decorations and Medals, known as the HD Committee) were aware of these circumstances and had decided on this basis that HMS Concord's personnel did not qualify for the award.

The Petitioner, however, rejects this version of events and calls for an investigation into the circumstances of this award on the basis that key documents relating to the incident were corrupted or missing. In support of his case, the Petitioner presents evidence which includes a telegram dated 31 July 1949 purporting to be from Sir Ralph Stevenson, the then British Ambassador to China, to the Foreign Office. The telegram offers advice on how this incident should be handled publicly and includes a statement that "No, repeat, no publicity should be given to the fact that HM Ship Concord entered Chinese territorial waters."

The Petitioner also refers to what he says are entries from HMS Concord's ships log for Sunday, 31st July 1949 and an exchange of signals between the various participants which, if accurate, would also support the case that Concord did, in fact, proceed up the Yangtze river and met HMS Amethyst in the vicinity of the Woosung forts, well into Chinese territorial waters, rather than at the mouth of the river as the formal record records (HMS Concord

Association website). If this is the case, HMS Concord would have been at considerable risk from Chinese shore batteries during the final phase of the escape and so would meet the original criteria for award of this medal.

Award of Medals and decorations - UK Government position

The award of medals and decorations in the UK is handled by a committee of senior civil servants, chaired by the Cabinet Secretary and Head of the Home Civil Service known as the HD Committee. The HD Committee has maintained a policy over a number of years that it will not consider the retrospective institution or belated issue of awards and medals for service given in earlier years. In particular, the Committee will not reconsider cases that took place more than five years ago. The reason for this policy is that the present HD Committee feels that it cannot put itself in the place of the Committee which made the original decision and which would have been able to take account of the views of the Government and of other interested parties at the time of the decision. The HD Committee has made it clear on a number of occasions in response to requests for the institution of belated awards that it will not reconsider this policy. The Committee say that if an exception were to be made for one case it would be almost impossible to refuse to re-consider every other claim for retrospective institution of an award or medal

This position was confirmed most recently in a response to an appeal to the Sovereign by the Petitioner requesting her intervention on this matter. The Petitioner refers to correspondence with the office of the Naval Secretary who, on 17 July 2009, wrote

“I have been asked to reply on behalf of the Ministry of Defence in view of the Naval Secretary’s responsibility for matters relating to naval medals. [...].

In your letter you made reference to the Government’s policy that no consideration will be given to the institution of medals instituted in recognition of service given many years previously. I regret that there is little I can add to this other than to confirm that this policy applies equally to applications to review the qualifying criteria for existing medals’ where these are received more than five years after the medal’s institution.

There is no avenue now available for consideration to be given to amending the qualifying criteria that the appropriate authorities deemed appropriate for the NGSM ‘Yangtze 1949’ clasp at the time this medal was instituted in 1949”

(Ref: D/NAVSEC (H&A)1760/4/4/9 quoted on the HMS Concord Association website)

Scottish Government Action

The Scottish Government has not been approached on this issue and has said that it has no locus in consideration of the subject matter of the petition.

Scottish Parliament Action

This issue has not been previously considered by the Parliament.

Denis Oag
Principal Research Specialist
12 January 2010

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