



On May 3rd 2026, Dr Hans-Christian Anderson delivered the sermon at the annual memorial service for Denmark's War Sailors (1940 - 1945) at St Nicholas Cathedral, Newcastle upon Tyne.

We have gathered today to celebrate the Danes merchant navy seamen who volunteered in 1940, to sail for the allies.

They defied orders from their government to return to Denmark. Instead, almost all of them sailed to allied ports and offered their ships and their services to the allies.

What followed, for most of them, was five years away from their homes and their families. Five years of sailing all over the world with all kinds of cargo, on all the world's oceans.

Out of the six thousand, some 1,900 never made it back. Their memorial is here in front of you. It is here because the British government decided that they should have an official home town. That home town became Newcastle upon Tyne because the Danish consul offered to take them.

He had no facilities whatsoever apart from his office, but this is where most of the six thousand Danes ended up.

Of course, they and their ships were not meant to stay in Newcastle. They were meant to sail. They found lodgings around Newcastle. The ordinary seamen lived in the streets around Westmoreland Road, whose slums have now disappeared. But the Danish Church, St John's from 1892 still stands, functions as a church but no longer Danish. The ship's officers looked for more elegant surroundings in Jesmond.

In March of 1941 the London government organised a club for the Danes in St Nicholas Buildings opposite the Cathedral.

It was opened as the Danish Seafarers Club in March 1941 by Sir Arthur Salter, Parliamentary Secretary in the Ministry of Shipping.

In his speech he stressed that

"Every ship must keep its convoy date, must be turned around in port as quickly as possible, must be repaired with all speed when damaged," said Sir Arthur.

"Every hour that we can save by intense effort in building or repairing is a help in an Allied victory and an earlier Allied victory."

There would be minimal time for rest and recreation.

In the club they had a reading room, a restaurant and for the officers there was a billiards room. Officers and men did not mix.

The British security services also had an office here. The Danes were monitored.

This was where the "pool" of Danish sailors was based and maintained, where crews were allocated to ships, where they received their wages.

This was where they could store their belongings while they were at sea.

Apart from the Danish church in Elswick, a second Danish church was opened in the Sailor's Bethel high above the River Tyne. Both churches provided religious services and tea, coffee and chat.

But they were mostly at sea.

In 1995, when the Danish Church celebrated the War Sailors here in Newcastle, I spoke to the Danish lady who worked in administration in the club.

She remembered, she told me, one night when she sat on the floor in her office, surrounded by crew lists, recording those who had lost their lives in the most recent convoy. The names of those men she knew but would never see again. Who would not return to pick up their belongings from storage.

So, we must assume that the sailors did not find it easy to relax. That they worked hard at it when they had the time.

It will have required the consumption of a lot of beer and perhaps a lot of visits to the ladies of the night who worked the streets around Westmoreland Road.

I imagine that some of them will also have visited local GPs, hoping that their bad cough or their sore swollen knee might earn them a little more time ashore.

If they did, I suspect that local doctors knew they had to prescribe a couple of aspirin and plenty of fresh air.

Then back to work.

The other day I was on the train to London. I used the free internet and one of those church emails came in. I did not have to open it fully, I could read enough in the in-tray on my mobile to read this:

"Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end (...) he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him."
John 13, 1-15

What struck me was those words: "Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world ..."

It suddenly made sense. This must have been the sentiment in the minds of the Danish war sailors as they travelled down the town or out to Blyth to join a ship.

Or caught a train to Loch Ewe in Scotland to join one of the Arctic convoy or Liverpool to cross the Atlantic.

Would they ever see Newcastle upon Tyne again, would they ever collect their personal belongings which the club would keep in store while they were away?

And that is where I see their heroism.

They volunteered to sail for the allies, in general terms.

And with each sailing, each time they started a new voyage, it must have been in their minds that this could be the last one. They knew that this might be the time when their lives would end. And the humility Jesus shows as he washes the feet of his disciples, that humility the Danish sailors had to learn.

They returned home some time after the end of the German occupation of Denmark. By then

the memory of war was already beginning to fade in Denmark. Nobody was interested in what they had gone through.

Nobody understood the magnitude of their sacrifice or their importance for not only the allies but also for their home country.

So, yes, the sailors who gave their lives are indeed fallen heroes and those who survived true veterans of war service.

It took fifty years before they were recognised as such.

They now have status as freedom fighters and as they started their work for the allies the day after the German invasion in April 1940, they were the first.

And because they sailed supplies to Normandy in June 1944, they finally earned Denmark status as a war ally in World War Two.

In 1995, at last, the Danish flag was flown in Normandy on D-Day, June sixth.

In his last moments, on the cross, Jesus has doubts.

Like other human beings, he feels fear and pain.

He suffered and died on the cross for us, that our sins might be forgiven. That was his mission on earth, if we can call it that, and he knew what was to come.

The Danish War sailors suffered and many of them died for us. Without certainty of what their future might be.

Today, in St Nicholas Cathedral, we pray for them and thank them for what they did for us.

We can perhaps say that we must remind ourselves today that we must have faith in God but also in the ability of men and women to take on the difficult tasks when that is necessary.

Strive to be like Jesus. At the very least strive to be the best human being you can

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(<https://www.facebook.com/dkinnortheastengland/>)