21 June 2010

Dear Mr Cochrane

PETITION PE1312

Thank you for your letter of 3 June in respect of the above-noted petition. I have been asked to reply.

The Minister for Defence Personnel, Welfare and Veterans, Andrew Robatham MP, responded on 15 June to the 18 March letter from the Minister for Housing and Communities to the previous Secretary of State for Defence about the ‘Yangtze 1949’ clasp. I attach a copy of the letter, as requested by the Public Petitions Committee.

Yours sincerely

Alister Murphy
You wrote to the then Defence Secretary on 18 March 2010 on behalf of the Scottish Parliament Public Petitions Committee about the 'Yangtze 1949' clasp to the Naval General Service Medal (1915) (NGSM), and the claim to that award by veterans who served in the destroyer, HMS CONCORD. Frank McAveety MSP, the Convener of the Scottish Parliament Public Petitions Committee, to whom I am copying this letter, also wrote on the same issue and I hope that he will take this as a reply to his letter as well.

As a result of the petition and the concerns that have been raised by naval veterans over a number of years, a review has been conducted by the Department into the institution of the 'Yangtze 1949' clasp to the NGSM. I enclose a copy.

You will see from this that, quite apart from the long standing Government position of successive administrations that no consideration can be given to reviewing medals that were instituted many years previously, there appears to be a clear reason why HMS CONCORD was not included in the list of ships and units that are eligible for the clasp therefore see no grounds for reversing that decision. I recognise that this will be a disappointment for the veterans concerned; but this does not, of course, detract from CONCORD'S service on the night of 30/31st July 1949 or the respect in which her crew deserve to be held.
The ‘Yangtze 1949’ Clasp
to the
Naval General Service Medal (1915)

Review of records pertaining to the institution of the Clasp and the eligibility of HMS CONCORD

The 1949 Yangtze Incident

1. • 20 April. HMS AMETHYST on her way up the Yangtze River to relieve HMS CONSORT came under fire from Communist Chinese forces and became entrapped in the river.
   • 20 April. HMS CONSORT proceeding down river, went to AMETHYST's aid by engaging the enemy forces but was forced to disengage and continue downriver.
   • 21 April. HMS LONDON and HMS BLACK SWAN despatched up river to AMETHYST's assistance, were also unsuccessful and had to retire.
   • 22 April. Lt Cdr KERANS, the Assistant Naval Attaché at Nanking joined AMETHYST from overland, to assume command from her wounded Commanding Officer.
   • 30/31 July. HMS AMETHYST made her escape down river where, in the morning of 31 July, she was met by HMS CONCORD sent upriver earlier that morning to offer assistance if required. Both ships subsequently reached safety, seemingly without being recognised and without having had to go into action.

Notes
1. HMS AMETHYST, HMS CONSORT, HMS LONDON, and HMS BLACK SWAN are eligible for the NGSM clasp, as are a number of RAF aircrew and other personnel in RAF Sunderland aircraft that were engaged, during the actions on 20th and 21st April.

2. HMS AMETHYST, i.e. her crew, remained eligible for the clasp for the whole duration of the Incident between 20 April and 31 July 1949. One day's service in the ship served to qualify for the clasp. The final date for AMETHYST’s eligibility is, in fact, immaterial as there were no new joiners to the ship after 22 April though reference to 31 July 1949 in the context of the medal, serves as reminder of the length of AMETHYST’s trying enforced incarceration in the river before she rejoined the Fleet.

3. HMS CONCORD had entered the Yangtze river very early on the morning of 31 July to be on hand to assist AMETHYST by providing gunfire support if the Chinese fort on the river bank at Woosung attempted to interfere with AMETHYST's escape. In the event, by the time AMETHYST reached CONCORD, the Woosung fort had seemingly failed to detect the two ships and AMETHYST had, to all intents and purposes successfully made her escape in that, after that point it appears that there was little the Communist Chinese could have done to impede the passage to the open sea. It has been suggested that mobile Chinese artillery batteries were deployed on the river bank further downstream and that the two ships remained at risk during their passage downriver beyond Woosung. Whether this can be verified is not known but, as with the fort at Woosung, the ships do not seem to have been detected or at least, were not engaged at any time before they reached safety.

The institution of the ‘Yangtze 1949’ clasp to the NGSM

2. The institution of a medal is an administrative process albeit one predicated on the requirement to recognise operational activity. In brief, the Commander-in-Chief in a theatre of operations, almost certainly partly guided by precedent, will make a submission that the risk and rigour faced by personnel under command should be recognised by the institution of medallic

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1 The Naval General Service Medal (NGSM) was instituted in 1915, retrospective to 1909. It was similar in intention to the 1847 Naval General Service Medal for which some 230 clasps were instituted to recognise naval battles and more minor naval engagements and actions between 1793 and 1840. The NGSM (1915) was not used to recognise service at sea in the Great War or Second World War but recognised naval action and activity of a lesser level of intensity than that associated with global conflict or major campaigns such as the Korean War. Between 1909 and 1964 when the NGSM (1915) was discontinued, some 17 clasps were instituted recognising a variety of naval activity from operational service in Palestine (1936-39, 1945 – 48), Malaya (1946 - 1960), Yangtze (1949), Near East (Suez, 1956) to post-War minesweeping operations (1945-51) and Bomb and Mine Clearance operations (1945-53). The NGSM could only issued to personnel who qualified for one of the named clasps; the first time an individual qualified for a clasp they were issued with the clasp together with the NGSM itself, for the clasp to be fixed to the medal's ribbon. Those entitled to subsequent clasp(s) were only issued with the clasp to add to the ribbon. The Army and the RAF awarded their equivalent General Service Medal (1918) in recognition of similar levels of operational activity. The NGSM (1915) and the GSM (1918) were both discontinued and replaced by a new tri-service, General Service Medal (GSM) in 1964 (retrospective to 1962).

2 “Risk and rigour” is an imprecise term but one that is used by medal administrative authorities to define the risk to life and limb exerted by enemy forces as well as the environmental rigour and exigencies of Service life on operations where this is assessed to be
recognition. British campaign and operational service medals are part of the UK's national system of Honours and Awards and medals. Whilst they may be proposed by the Armed Forces and the Ministry of Defence (or predecessor Departments), their institution is not the sole prerogative of the Armed Forces or the MOD. Only the Sovereign can approve the institution of a medal. Since the Second World War at least, the Sovereign’s approval has been sought by the HD Committee\(^3\). Today the Committee operates under the auspices of the Cabinet Office, but in 1949 the HD Committee was administered by the Treasury.

**The records\(^4\)**

3. In order to consider the question why HMS CONCORD was not included in the list of units that qualified for the NGSM ‘Yangtze 1949’ clasp, it is necessary to establish why the clasp was instituted, that is, what exactly it was that the authorities at the time intended the clasp to recognise. Under the provisions of Public Records legislation, once official Government records are no longer required for administrative use they are obliged to be reviewed with a view to selection for permanent preservation in the public interest. Those judged to merit permanent preservation are transferred to the National Archives (formerly the Public Record Office) at Kew. Records not appropriate for permanent preservation are destroyed unless they merit transfer to an alternative approved place of deposit. As far as can be established, the contemporary Admiralty medal records proposing the institution of medallergic recognition for the Yangtze Incident were not selected for permanent preservation and transfer to Kew and can now only be assumed to have been destroyed.

4. The HD Committee’s records relating to this award have, however, survived and are now available at the National Archives at Kew in the Treasury series of records. The Treasury Ceremonial Office file, ‘CSM 232: General Service Medal: Yangtze’, covering the period August 1949 to June 1950, is available for examination at the National Archives at Kew under the TNA reference, T300/71. These papers are not obscure memoranda as has been claimed, but are primary records of the senior Government Committee responsible for the institution of British medals.

**Rationale behind the institution of the clasp**

5. Examination of T300/71 shows that on 14 July 1949, at a time when AMETHYST was still incarcerated in the river, the Commanders-in-Chief, Far East proposed the institution of medallergic recognition “in respect of the recent operation on the River Yangtze”. The submission noted “From all accounts received, the behaviour of all officers and men engaged in the operations has been excellent under exceptionally trying and dangerous conditions. Many of the men were young – 17 and 18 years old – and thus had seen no war service.” The submission also includes a record of the casualties “sustained by Royal navy personnel in the operations:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ship</th>
<th>Killed</th>
<th>Wounded</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HMS AMETHYST</td>
<td>2 officers</td>
<td>4 officers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>18 ratings</td>
<td>24 ratings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HMS LONDON</td>
<td>1 officer</td>
<td>2 officers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>14 ratings</td>
<td>50 ratings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HMS CONSORT</td>
<td>10 ratings</td>
<td>1 officer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

significantly above that which might be routinely expected to be tolerated by UK Armed Forces personnel. British campaign and operational service medals are not intended to be a record of service. A proposal that medallergic recognition should be instituted requires its own individual statement of the risk and rigour involved in the specific operation.

\(^3\) In 1949, the HD Committee consisted of the Permanent Secretary at HM Treasury (Chairman), and senior officers and officials representing His Majesty, the Prime Minister, Central Chancery of the Orders of Knighthood, the Admiralty (the Permanent Secretary, and the Naval Secretary), War Office (Permanent Under-Secretary, and the Military Secretary), Air Ministry (Permanent Under-Secretary, and the Director-General of Personnel), the Colonial Office, Commonwealth Relations Office, Foreign Office, Ministry of Supply, and the Board of Trade.

\(^4\) “Public record” is taken to mean contemporary official government records available in the National Archives as well as other reference sources available in the public domain. As the veterans have pointed out, material alluding to the Yangtze Incident either wholly or in part has also been deposited in other Archives and research institutes over the years. The Yangtze Incident has been the subject of numerous published books and other accounts, including at least one feature film. The accuracy of these accounts depends, of course, on the thoroughness of the research or the intended audience. One of these books, “Hostage on the Yangtze: Britain, China, and the Amethyst Crisis of 1949”, Malcolm H MURFETT, 1991 has been used as a source of general background to the Incident. MURFETT’S book contains an extensive bibliography of primary and secondary reference sources.
HMS BLACK SWAN  Killed: None  Wounded: 6 ratings

In all, a total of 3 officers and 42 ratings were killed and 7 officers and 104 ratings seriously wounded.\(^5\)

6. The submission also included the following: "The scale of attack on each ship can be gauged by the number of hits received:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ship</th>
<th>Hits</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HMS CONSORT</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>105mm shells</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>14</td>
<td>75mm shells</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>35</td>
<td>37mm shells</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HMS LONDON</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Shell hits, excluding a large number which did not penetrate or caused only superficial damage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HMS BLACK SWAN</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Shell hits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HMS AMETHYST</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Shell hits, excluding splinters and superficial damage (incomplete information)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

7. The submission goes on: "Although with the exception of HMS AMETHYST the period of action was short, in view of the heavy casualties sustained and the exemplary behaviour of all ranks we have no hesitation in recommending that a General Service Medal be awarded to all those who were serving in those of His Majesty's ships which were actively engaged in the operation. We further recommend that all those personnel who flew in both or either of the sorties made by the RAF Sunderland aircraft in aid of HMS AMETHYST should qualify for a General Service Medal. Some 20 individuals including nine RN officers and 2 Army other ranks are affected. No serious casualties were sustained. The Captain of the Sunderland aircraft has been granted an immediate award of a bar to the Distinguished Flying Cross. ... We submit that not only does the nature of the operations merit to the full the award of a General Service Medal, but also that such an award would have an extremely favourable effect on morale particularly in respect of the young men serving in His Majesty's ships. ... We therefore strongly recommend that our proposals be placed before the Committee of Honours and Awards at the first opportunity..."

8. The submission proposed that the qualifying personnel should be "all those personnel who were serving in His Majesty's ships concerned on the dates or within the period shown below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ship</th>
<th>Dates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HMS CONSORT</td>
<td>20 April 1949</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HMS LONDON</td>
<td>21 April 1949</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HMS BLACK SWAN</td>
<td>21 April 1949</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HMS AMETHYST</td>
<td>20 April 1949 until the date inclusive on which she is released by Chinese Communist authorities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Officers carried to HMS AMETHYST on 21 and/or 22 April in the RAF aircraft.

Army personnel carried to HMS AMETHYST on 21 and/or 22 April in the RAF aircraft.

RAF personnel in the Sunderland aircraft which flew to HMS AMETHYST on 21 and/or 22 April, and in particular the RAF Medical Officer who was transferred to AMETHYST and is

\(^5\) MURFETT's book indicates that the figures quoted in the C-in-C paper, for example those quoted for HMS LONDON may not be absolutely accurate, in terms of casualties sustained or hits received. MURFETT's book, based on primary sources also indicates the scale of LONDON's response to the enemy shelling, firing 600 rounds in just over three hours. The differences between T300/71 and MURFETT are relatively minor and do not detract from the scale of the action on 21 April.
still on board.”

9. On 25 August 1949, that is, after AMETHYST’s escape on 31 July, the C-in-C Committee, Far East amended their submission in respect of HMS AMETHYST’s eligibility to reflect her escape: “Now that HMS AMETHYST has rejoined the Fleet, the period of qualification should read 20 April 1949 to 31 July 1949, both dates inclusive.”

10. T300/71 shows that, in October 1949 His Majesty approved the proposal that medallic recognition should be instituted. The Prime Minister announced the grant of the medal, in Parliament on 1 November 1949. This was timed to coincide with the return of HMS AMETHYST to the UK on that date.

HMS CONCORD
11. Examination of T300/71 shows that the HD Committee were not invited to consider whether HMS CONCORD should be included as one of the units whose personnel would be eligible for the medal. This is central to the veterans’ claim that HMS CONCORD’s part in HMS AMETHYST’s escape on the night of 30/31 July 1949 was deliberately covered up and that this alleged cover up led to HMS CONCORD being omitted from the list of units that were specified as qualifying for the medal.

12. This allegation is not sustainable. As the HD papers show, eligibility for the medal was based on the actual risk and rigour experienced by those ships and units that were involved in the actions on 20 and 21 April 1949, and in recognition of HMS AMETHYST’s incarceration in the river between 20 April and 31 July 1949. It is a matter of historical fact in accounts of HMS AMETHYST’s escape down the river on the night of 30/31 July when she was met by HMS CONCORD early in the morning of 31 July, that HMS CONCORD was not subjected to the same degree of actual risk and rigour as that which the other ships and units had experienced in April 1949. In fairness, this has never been alleged.

HMS CONCORD’s ship’s log
13. HMS CONCORD’s ship’s log for July 1949 has also been examined. This is available for examination at the National Archives at Kew under the reference ADM 53/125839. Some suspicion has been attached to the recent removal of this log from Kew. The log had, in fact been borrowed from Kew by the Ministry of Defence as a source of primary reference in order to answer the questions about HMS CONCORD and the medal. It was returned to Kew when it was no longer needed as a source reference. The log has been generally available for examination in the National Archives from 1980, some 30 years from date of closure in accordance with Public Records legislation. Within the records and sources consulted to answer these medal-related enquiries, nothing has been identified that alludes to the removal of the ship’s log from HMS CONCORD following AMETHYST’s escape. It is not possible to speculate why the log would have been removed from the ship in 1949 but there is nothing to indicate that this removal is germane to eligibility for the medal.

14. ADM 53/125839 shows that on the evening of Saturday 30 July 1949, HMS CONCORD was at 10 minutes notice for steam which was reduced to 2 hours notice for steam. At 0145 on the morning of Sunday 31 July, she moved into a position ready to proceed up the river. At 0345 she weighed and proceeded into the river. AMETHYST was sighted at 0525. CONCORD secured (that is, stood down) from action stations at 0715, and at 1202 the main engines were rung off and CONCORD reverted to 2 hours notice for steam. It is recognised that HMS CONCORD’s people would have been aware of what had happened to AMETHYST and the other ships in April, and that in proceeding up the Yangtze ready to support AMETHYST both ships were in potential danger. It remains the case, however, that compared to the events of 20 and 21 April, and AMETHYST’s trying experiences in the Yangtze between April and July, HMS CONCORD was not subject to the same degree of actual risk and rigour that the appropriate authorities at the time deemed merited recognition. British campaign and operational service medals are not intended to be records of service but are intended to recognise exposure to actual risk and rigour over and above what might reasonably be expected of service personnel. It is a matter of record that HMS CONCORD was
despatched into the Yangtze and it would be reasonable to assume that the senior officers on the
spot anticipated that she might be required to go into action to assist AMETHYST. There is nothing
to be gained by speculating what might have happened had this been necessary but in the event,
nothing untoward did occur and the two ships made their way out of the river to safety. It follows
that the location where the two ships met in the river which is a key element in the veterans’
allegations, is immaterial in terms of qualification for the medal.

15. Qualification for the clasp required one day’s service in AMETHYST during the period 20
April to 31 July 1949. The question has been asked whether a member of CONCORD’s crew who
went aboard AMETHYST on the morning of 31 July would qualify for the award? CONCORD’s log
indicates that Lt GRANT RN, together with a Signalman and a Telegraphist were temporarily
loaned to AMETHYST during the evening of 31 July. It is assessed that any application form a
member of CONCORD’s crew would have been disallowed on the same grounds that CONCORD
herself was not eligible for the clasp. In the relatively short period between CONCORD meeting
AMETHYST and both ships reaching safety, a member of CONCORD’s crew who had gone
aboard AMETHYST would not have been subject to the privations experienced by AMETHYST's
personnel during their 104 day ordeal in the river.

Cover up

16. It is alleged that CONCORD’s presence in the river was covered up. Whilst this is not
addressed in the medal file, published sources show that it is a matter of record that it was
intended to conduct what might be described as a damage limitation exercise to prevent further
detriment to British interests in China. It is a matter of record that instructions were issued not to
publicise the fact that CONCORD had entered Chinese territorial waters. It would be reasonable to
assume that this would have included a restriction on HMS CONCORD's crew publicly discussing
their involvement. In the event, however, during a briefing to the press on Saturday 6 August, the
Commander-in-Chief Far East Station, Sir Patrick BRIND inadvertently revealed CONCORD's part
in AMETHYST's escape. Insofar as this affects the institution of the medal, as indicated above, the
initial proposal from C-in-C Far East that the operations in the Yangtze in April 1949 merited
recognition were submitted in July 1949. The amendment about the final qualifying date for HMS
AMETHYST was made in August 1949, within weeks of the inadvertent disclosure that HMS
CONCORD had been in the river. On the basis of the medal records it is assessed that the
omission of HMS CONCORD from the list of qualifying units was neither an oversight, nor an
attempt to perpetuate a cover up that had already been compromised, but a reflection that it was
known that the ship did not meet the specific qualifying service that it had already been agreed the
medal was intended to recognise. It is assessed that, had the implications of instituting the medal
been of major concern to His Majesty's Government in respect of Anglo-Sino official, diplomatic
and trade relations, it was entirely possible for the institution of the medal to have been postponed
or even cancelled. That the decision to proceed with the institution of the medal was never
questioned indicates that there were no concerns about possible Chinese reactions.

17. Each new medal is instituted on the merits of the individual circumstances of operational
service that it is intended to recognise. The proposal to institute medallic recognition may be
based, in part, on precedent but it will be appreciated that the proposal for a medal cannot take into
account operations that have yet to take place. T300/71 includes reference to a similar award
being considered to recognise operations in Malaya6. It would not, however be expected that a
comparison would have been drawn between these and the Yangtze operations; the operational
environment was dissimilar but both were individually deserving of recognition.

18. The HD Committee records specifying what the medal was intended to recognise allow the
conclusion to be drawn that it would have been clear at the time that the part played by HMS
CONCORD during HMS AMETHYST’s escape did not compare with the events that the
contemporary authorities deemed merited recognition. Once the two ships had reached safety
without incident it would have been clear to the naval authorities on the Far East Station who had

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6 These operations were recognised by the ‘Malaya’ clasp to the N/GSM, instituted in 1950, retrospective to 16 June 1948. The clasp
remained extant until operations in Malaya ceased in September 1960.
initiated the medal proposal that HMS CONCORD had not been exposed to the actual risk and rigour that they intended the medal to represent. Neither, as indicated in paragraph 15 above, are there any grounds to suggest that HMS CONCORD’s eligibility would have been overlooked or disregarded for any other reason.

The '5 Year' Rule and NGSM ‘Canal Zone’

19. The relevant authorities at the time were specific in describing what the ‘Yangtze 1949’ clasp was intended to recognise. There are no grounds to indicate that their criteria had been misapplied in respect of HMS CONCORD. Neither are there any grounds to waive the existing criteria in order to make HMS CONCORD’s personnel eligible for this award. Neither are there any plans to review the criteria so many years after the event. It has been long standing Government policy of successive administrations that the institution of a new medal will not be considered more than five years after the events under consideration. This applies equally to applications to review the qualifying criteria for existing medals. The veterans have cited the ‘Canal Zone’ clasp as a precedent for the belated institution of medallic recognition. This is not an appropriate comparison. Unlike the contemporary ‘Yangtze 1949’ clasp, the belated institution of the ‘Canal Zone’ clasp denotes service that had not previously been recognised. Further, the HD sub-Committee that investigated the canal Zone veterans’ claims found evidence that the institution of recognition for service in the Canal Zone during the early 1950s had been considered at the time. For reasons that could not be established, the proposal did not appear to have been rejected nor brought to fruition. These considerations do not apply in the case of the ‘Yangtze 1949’ clasp.

Conclusion

20. Examination of appropriate and relevant medal records and accounts relating to HMS AMETHYST’s escape from the River Yangtze during the morning of 31 July 1949 allow the conclusions to be drawn that:

- The qualifying criteria used to determine eligibility for the clasp reflect the service that the appropriate authorities at the time considered merited medallic recognition.

- Whilst it was initially intended not to publicize HMS CONCORD’s presence in the Yangtze during HMS AMETHYST’s escape, this intended lack of acknowledgement did not last longer than a few days. There is no evidence to support the contention that HMS CONCORD was not determined to be eligible for the medal for this reason.

- HMS CONCORD’s deployment into the River Yangtze on the morning of 31 July 1949 does not bear comparison with the operations on 20 and 21 April 1949, nor with the circumstances of HMS AMETHYST’s enforced incarceration in the river from 20 April 1949 until her escape during the night of 30/31 July 1949. It is assessed that it is for this reason that the relevant authorities at the time did not include HMS CONCORD in the list of ships and units that are eligible for the ‘Yangtze 1949’ clasp to the Naval General Service Medal (1915).

Naval Secretary (Honours & Awards) SO1
Navy Command HQ
May 2010

7 The ‘Canal Zone’ clasp was instituted in 2003 in recognition of service in the Suez Canal Zone between 1951 and 1954.