

# "INTERCEPTED AT SEA"

By John Nixon

Book finally published by Royal Navy Comrades

Leslie Howson and John Nixon

(source: <http://www.brierleyvillage.co.uk/YOURCONTRIBUTION/alannixon2.htm>)

A book has just been published by two Navy men from Brierley, Leslie Howson and John Nixon, entitled 'Intercepted at Sea: The Human Cost of Insecure Communications During Two World Wars', (Woodfield Publishing Ltd, Woodfield House, Babsham Lane Bognor Regis, West Sussex PO21

5EL. [Http://www.woodfieldpublishing.com](http://www.woodfieldpublishing.com). Price £16.

The principal author, Leslie Howson, sadly died in 1986 after spending five years following his early retirement to work on the book, which is based on his experiences and knowledge as a Petty Officer Telegraphist in the Royal Navy. Leslie had joined the Navy in 1937 and served throughout World War II, seeing service in northern waters, the Mediterranean, the landings in Sicily, and the D-Day landings before finally leaving the Royal Navy for medical reasons in 1948.

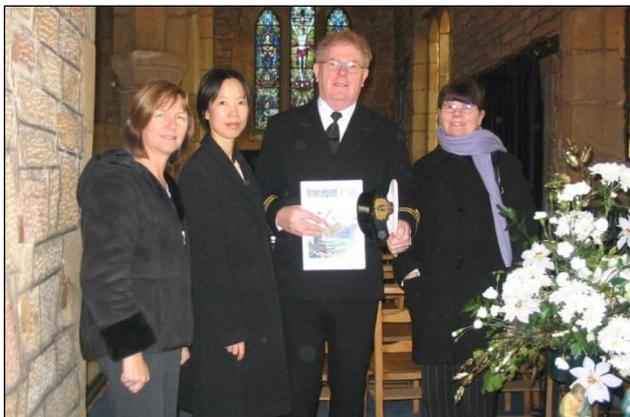
After becoming aware of his terminal illness and the fact that he would not be alive long enough to complete it, he bequeathed his manuscript (700 hand-written pages) and joint copyright to John Nixon who was still serving in the Royal Navy as an Instructor Officer, teaching radio telecommunications and therefore with knowledge of the subject material. The manuscript also came with a small library of books and research material and letters. 54 year-old John Nixon, who retired from the Royal Navy in 1992 and is now a Research Fellow in Health Economics at the University of York, said "Leslie was a friend of my parents and lived in the same street in Brierley. We had both joined the Royal Navy at the age of 15, entering the famous (now closed down) boys training establishment, HMS *Ganges*, at Shotley Gate, Ipswich. I joined in 1968, 31 years after Leslie. The task of completing the book has been immensely satisfying but an enormous undertaking that has taken me 20 years to finish and publish, whilst still working more or less full time".

The subject matter and message of the book, as summarised on the publisher's website, is that the 'history of naval warfare is littered with incidents in which ships were sunk, with great loss of life, due to the enemy having intercepted badly coded or otherwise insecure signals. Whilst many people are aware of the strategic advantage gained by the Allies during World War Two by the cracking of the 'Enigma' code used by the German U-Boat fleet, few are aware that Allied naval codes were similarly cracked by the Germans, leading to significant losses of ships and personnel.

In this expansive study of the subject, Leslie Howson, a former naval telegrapher during World War II, examines the sorry history of careless and unguarded messages sent between Royal Navy and allied ships during two world wars, and the tragic consequences for thousands of seamen who lost their lives due to intelligence all too easily gathered by the enemy. These lapses of security could have been avoided, he argues, but for the stubborn refusal of the Admiralty to address the problem, and he supplies plenty of detailed evidence to support his claims in a highly informative narrative that encompasses the social, economic and political contexts of its subject matter. Those with an interest in maritime history will find much thought-provoking material in this forthright and sometimes controversial book, which pulls no punches in its criticism of 'the powers-that-be'. ISBN 1-84683-020-6; page size 205 x 290 mm; 196 pages; monochrome photographs'.

John's biggest task was to get the manuscript into a word processor package so that it could be checked, verified and formatted. In this work he was assisted by several members of his family and friends, including his sister Barbara and wife Yumi (photo). He then wrote a preface and introduction (from Leslie Howson's notes), linking paragraphs and worked out coherent headings for the 25 chapters that make up this extremely detailed piece of work. The final chapter includes an apology by Leslie Howson for the 'avoidable deaths of 40,000 Merchant seamen during World War II', for which he felt a sense of guilt as a member of the Royal Navy whose role, among others, was to protect the British Merchant Fleet. The book is dedicated to those who lost their lives in such harrowing circumstances.

The completion of this book is perhaps testimony to the bond that is shared with ex-HMS *Ganges* boys. Even though HMS *Ganges* was closed down in 1976, it has the largest membership of any of the Royal Navy's Associations with annual re-unions and its own gazette and web site. John Nixon concluded, "having made a promise to Leslie to complete his book I could not give up until it had been published. It has taken me much longer and was more demanding to undertake than I first thought, but both Leslie and I can now rest knowing that in the end our mission has been completed".



Lieutenant John Nixon Royal Navy (Rtd) at Felkirk Church, close to the home village of Brierley.

With John is his wife, Yumi, and sisters Barbara (left) and Valerie (right) who all contributed to the work to transfer Leslie's 700-page manuscript into a Word-processing package.

Below are images of the book and the mast at HMS *Ganges* in 1937 – the year Leslie Howson was trained there, and John visiting the grave of Leslie to pay his respects to the principal author.

