

Navy heroes' actions honoured after 54 years

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Maurice Egan, William Mynes, Pat O Mathuna and Kieran O'Callaghan, who attended on behalf of his late father BRIAN LAWLESS/PA

Two Navy veterans have been honoured after more than 50 years for their bravery in saving 80 lives on a crippled ship.

Lieutenant Pat O Mathuna, 86, and Stoker William Mynes, 73, fought a blaze in a boiler room on the LE Cliona on May 29, 1962, after a depth charge exploded prematurely during a training exercise off Cork.

They were given scrolls of commendation alongside Maurice Egan, chief engine room artificer on the ship. Another scroll was awarded posthumously to the family of Gerry O'Callaghan, chief stoker.

A campaign for an award had been launched because the sailors were not recommended for medals by senior officers within the four-year deadline.

Mr Mynes admitted to a few nerves at the ceremony, on LE Niamh at Sir John Rogerson's Quay in Dublin, but said that the day was about recognition. "I'm just getting used to the idea of it now," he said.

A plaque will be unveiled at the Naval Service headquarters on Haulbowline island in Cork Harbour this month to remember the crewmen's endeavours.

Paul Kehoe, junior defence minister, awarded the scrolls for brave and decisive actions in bringing the fire under control. "Each one of these four men fearlessly faced difficulty, danger and pain while successfully extinguishing the fire that had taken hold on board the LE Cliona," he said.

"The swift and selfless endeavours of each one of these four men ensured that tragedy was avoided and not a single life was lost. Even with the passage of time their endeavours are not forgotten."

The force of the blast from the depth charge blew the corvette several feet out of the water and ruptured oil lines, sparking the fire below deck. The LE Cliona, a former Royal Navy ship, was 20km from shore, off Daunt Rock near Roches Point, when the blaze took hold.

A large group of media including an RTE film crew and reporters from the Irish Examiner and Irish Independent were on board the ship when the exercise turned into an emergency.

With virtually no protection, Mr Mynes, 19 at the time, ordered two younger stokers to leave while he went into the confined space to cut off oil supplies. He suffered burns on his arms, hands and face.

The ship's second-in-command, Lieutenant O Mathuna, left the bridge and joined Mr Mynes below deck to fight the fire for 40 minutes.

The ship was eventually able to proceed to Haulbowline under her own steam for an investigation and repairs. She continued in service until 1970.

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