

Hero war dog still remembered 70 years on

Norway and Scotland unite to celebrate a remarkable canine

Molra Beaton

HE WAS one of the most extraordinary, decorated heroes of the Second World War – Bamse, a 14 stone St Bernard whose life has created an enduring bond between Norway and Scotland.

Not only did this courageous canine leap into the water to rescue a sailor who had fallen overboard, but he also knocked over a knifeman who was trying to attack a young lieutenant while stationed in Scotland – acts of bravery that earned him the animal's George Cross.

Tomorrow, hundreds of Bamse fans will gather in Montrose, where he is buried, to mark the 70th anniversary of the death of the hero sea dog – for what is expected to be the final time.

A delegation from Norway, who view the St Bernard as a national hero, will be taking part in the event, which will see a parade of St Bernards as well as a pipe band and a wreath laying ceremony and bugle playing the *Last Post*.

Norwegian ships have brought people to Montrose to visit Bamse's grave every ten years since the end of the war – and this year Vigdis Haftoe, whose father owned Bamse, will join the delegation as well as the mayor of Honningsvab, a Norwegian fishing town where he was born.

Honorary consuls from Norway, officers of the Norwegian and British navies, local sea cadets and other guests will also attend the event.

Dr Andrew Orr, chairman of the Montrose Heritage Trust, which organises the event,

said: "He was brave and steady and gave courage to the sailors – mainly teenagers and young men – who had no contact with their families at all during the war.

"At sea, Bamse was always in the thick of the action. Wearing his specially adapted steel helmet, he would stand in his favourite place up at the bow next to the Oerlikon gun, facing the enemy – unfazed by the noise of gunfire.

"On shore, Bamse looked after his men. He knew when they were going to be late back, after a night out, and would take the bus into town to round them up. The sailors eventually bought him his own bus pass, which he wore round his neck in a plastic wallet. He

'At sea, Bamse was always in the thick of the action'

stopped fights breaking out by rearing up to his full height of 6ft and placing his huge paws on the sailor's shoulders."

Orr, who also co-wrote a book about Bamse, called *Sea Dog Bamse, World War II Canine Hero*, added: "He has become a worldwide phenomena. His story seems to have become a way of educating people about the Second World War.

"It has also created this lovely bond between Scotland and Norway. We don't know for sure this will be last event like this, but there is a tendency, like the D-Day landings, that there comes a time when most of the veterans are dying off and that is the case here."

The story of Bamse started in Norway in September 1939 when his owner, Erling Haftoe,

skipper of the minesweeper Thorodd took him onboard his ship as a pet. However, the dog became such a valuable companion to the crew that months later he became a registered crew member, with his own ration book.

Bamse arrived in Britain in 1940 on one of the ships in the Royal Norwegian Navy flotilla that carried King Hakon VII and his government into exile following the annexation of Norway by the Nazis. Two years later, he was posted to Montrose when Haftoe, a naval captain, took command of the Thorodd, a minesweeper in the Norwegian navy.

The giant dog of war quickly captured the hearts of locals as his unwavering devotion and courage under fire made him a legend among the thousands of Norwegian sailors, soldiers and airmen in the Allied forces.

As the navy's official mascot, Bamse – Norwegian for "Little One" – would take up a position in the foremost guntower whenever the Thorodd went into battle, never leaving his post until the action ended.

His legend grew when he rescued a drowning sailor who had fallen into Montrose harbour and then saved the life of Lt August Nilsen, the second in command of Thorodd, when he was attacked at Dundee docks.

Bamse was only seven when he died by Montrose docks after suffering heart failure in July 1944. Hundreds of people lined the streets of the town as he was given a hero's funeral.

He was posthumously awarded the animals' George Cross and is buried in the sand dunes next to the town's Glaxo-SmithKline plant with his grave tended to by locals – his head facing towards Norway.

A statue of Bamse was unveiled in Montrose by Prince Andrew in October 2006.



» Clockwise from above: Bamse and his George Cross; sailors at a ceremony at the dog's grave; the bronze statue in Montrose; the mascot shakes a paw. Photograph: PDSA/PA