Spaniard who made history mourned

by MORT BIRCH

VETERANS gathered to pay a special tribute to a man who holds a unique place in British naval history.

They formed a guard of honour at the funeral of Alfredo Emilio Ruiz, the only Spaniard to have served in the Royal Navy and the D-Day Landings. A wreath was laid by the flag of the Royal Navy, covering his coffin as he was carried into the Heart of England Crematorium.

His Basque beret lay on top of the casket, joined by his medals, a heart-shaped floral tribute from his wife, and a wreath from the Spanish Embassy in London encircled by a large red and yellow ribbon, the colours of his native land.

Members of the Nuneaton Branch of the Royal Naval Association flanked the hearse behind their standard which was dipped in homage during the crematorium service.

Members of the Nuneaton and Stockford Branch of the Royal British Legion and other Ex-service Associations waited at the entrance to the chapel to add their homage.

His wife Janet Ruiz said: “They really did him proud. The family were very grateful and he would have loved it.”

Known as ‘Spanish Fred,’ he was born in San Sebastian in Northern Spain, but was among 4,000 children evacuated to England in 1937 by the Basque Government to allow them to escape the horrors of the Spanish Civil War.

He lived in Coventry, worked at the Alvis, but then the teenager, who had escaped the iron rule of Spanish dictator General Franco, found himself fighting against the Forces of Adolf Hitler.

Called up into the Royal Navy in 1942, he was assigned to Coastal Defences as a radar operator and at dawn on D-Day his motor launch ML147 escorted Canadian landing crafts on to Juno Beach.

After the war he lived in Coventry, but spent several years in Nuneaton where his second wife Janet was widowed at Kingswood Court, the sheltered accommodation in Kingswood Road, and was also at Shepperton Court.

When hostilities ceased, he went back to the Alvis where he stayed until he was made redundant and he then spent a few years at an engineering factory at Exhall until he retired.

He and his wife lived in Wakes for a while, but then settled at Barwell where he was living when he died at the age of 84.

Jack Pilkington, president of the Nuneaton Branch of the Royal Naval Association, said: “Until a couple of years ago he was a regular attendee at our meetings. He was a nice fellow and very popular. He was a British Citizen, he never lost his love of Spain and he returned regularly to visit his family and friends in San Sebastian.

He used to say: “I happened to have a choice and a privilege to love two countries. The one in which I was born, which is always in my heart, and my adopted one.”

After the funeral, his ashes were buried in the churchyard at Pillinge, the village where his wife Janet was born: “That was where he wanted to go,” she said.

His final resting place is a long way from the foothills of the Pyrenees in his homeland, but at the heart of the country he came to love and served with honour.

TRIBUTE... the White Ensign along with the red and yellow colours of his native Spain on ‘Fred’ Ruiz’s coffin as it is carried into the church.

HOMAGE... members of the Nuneaton Branch of the Royal Naval Association flanked the hearse as their standard bearer Ted Colechin leads the way.