

Tony's Story

Hello, Tony Bird speaking - actually Ralph Anthony Bird – Tony for short, but at school I was always called “Dicky.” Anyway, here we go; I was born in Cowbridge, Glamorgan in 1924. My father ran an agricultural – really an ironmongery business which he inherited from his father, which I think was started in 1783, so it was quite a well-established business.

I was educated at Pontfaen Council School in Cowbridge, from the age of about probably three, until ten, when my father went up to Gloucestershire to open a branch because the Cowbridge businesses were doing very well, and he'd been offered the franchise for the Massey – or not the Massey, but the Ferguson tractor - and he'd been offered quite a number of counties' distributorship. Anyway, that's jumping ahead a bit.

I was educated at Marling School, Stroud, and then I went to Wycliffe College at Stonehouse, which was a boarding school quite adjacent to our home, and the school was evacuated to Lampeter during the early part of the war because the Admiralty had taken a fancy to the school buildings, and I went to Lampeter where I stayed for three years, very happily; we used to organise shooting parties - for rabbits I remember; the local farmers were very keen, but of course we shouldn't have had guns there, but three or four of us organised little shooting parties, and we had a good time.

I think my vivid memory of Lampeter was the winter of forty-two, when the local lake froze up, and I think there was skating up there for – ooh – many, many times, and we had great fun. I played for the school in cricket and rugby, and was contemporary with Gilbert Parkhouse, who later became an England cricketer and a Welsh footballer – Welsh rugby footballer; and then, while I was at Lampeter, we were visited by a naval officer who was trying to conscript public schoolboys for the navy, and I actually volunteered at that time – I think I was about seventeen, and I attended an interview in his pharmacy, and when I left school at the age of eighteen, I was sent a letter asking me to report to HMS *Raleigh*, in Devonport, where I spent three [chuckles] arduous months marching up and down, and generally being taught how to behave – oh I think one of my vivid memories of that was taking rowing courses on one of the rivers and deliberately catching the oars

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– so that we fell backwards, and the Chief Petty Officer thought that was a really good joke, and he took it in good part.

Anyway, after that... I think, yes, I went to the barracks in Devonport and was then sent to join a ship which was just being re-fitted in Harland and Wolff's Yard in Belfast – HMS *Escapade* – we were a completely new crew, er, the ship having been extensively re-fitted after many very difficult Arctic convoys, and we understood from some of the old crew that they'd been on that infamous convoy, PQ17, where the navy were told to disperse by leaving the merchant ships to the mercy of the Germans. Whether that was actually true in essence, I don't honestly know.

Anyway, the ship... we had to have trials after refit, and my memory there is that one of... our steering motors failed, owing to, I think, sabotage, and we rammed a jetty which put us back about a fortnight; and then we went up to Scapa Flow to work up, to where we did extensive gunnery and sea trials, and... we went up to the islands; and being sort of potential officer material, I was posted as a lookout on the bridge where we were able to observe the operation of the ship as a whole, and while working up, I was asked to spot the poorest shot, when we were undertaking gunnery trials day and night.

Anyway, we then did some Atlantic convoys and we were then detailed to accompany a huge fleet of ships going down to North Africa for the "Operation Torch" which was a joint American/British invasion of North Africa, but I always remember we were escorting HMS *Furious*, the aircraft carrier, and she was taking this pretty rough trip going down from the Bay of Biscay, and I always remember Seafires taking off her deck – the deck must have been at angles of fifteen to twenty degrees, and how the pilots ever got the things down I don't honestly know.

But after "Operation Torch" we returned to Gibraltar and stayed there for some weeks I remember, and then we went back to Scapa Flow, did a couple of Atlantic convoys, and where I left the ship in January forty three... er.. having been asked to attend the training college at Brighton – HMS *Alfred*. Anyway, I went to HMS *Alfred* and was promoted to Temporary Midshipman, but that was [chuckles] – I remember – rescinded, they wrote in my paybook "promoted to Temporary Midshipman RNVR," but the Captain, Peel, he was

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in charge - he sent for me, and I think he said "Bird, you're a bit too young to go to sea as a Midshipman, and I think I'm going to send you back for further training at sea," so that's what happened but I was then in Devonport Dockyard – the barracks – and a Fleet Order appeared on the noticeboard asking people to volunteer as Fleet Air Arm pilots, and as I was at a dead end waiting for another ship, and nothing seemed to be happening, I volunteered but I was – went for an interview I think in Brighton for that, and then reported to HMS St *Vincent* which I think was in Portsmouth where we did a three-month training course as sort of forthcoming pilots for the Fleet Air Arm; and during that time I was put forward for ... a draft called The Admiral Tower Scheme, which meant we would be sent for training to America to be trained by Marines, and that's what happened – I went across to America and I think in about probably, June - June of forty-three, and went to Grosse Ile, having landed at Halifax, Nova Scotia in a snowstorm and I always remember we travelled to Detroit by train, and although the railway carriage had double-glazing I remember the snow was blowing in on us sleeping in our seats – very, very cold.

Anyway, Grosse Ile was an eye-opener – American Marine pilots trained us – very, very good and efficient, they were mostly young people – I was taught to fly by an ensign and also by a lieutenant – and, er... pretty young people... we trained on two wings – like biplanes... they're bigger than the Tiger Moth, and I went solo after about twelve hours, and er, stayed at Grosse Ile for about three months, clocking up fifty or sixty hours of flying time, but I think it was a biplane, Stearman, very nice, very, very capable aircraft, very steady, it must have been for me to fly it.

Anyway, after arriving at Grosse Ile, I think there were about thirty of us in the party – we were asked to attend a reception, which was being held, I think by a United Services organisation; anyway, at a hotel in Detroit, where we met with quite a number of Americans who had adopted each one of... each family adopted one of us, which was very good, and I was adopted by the... husband and wife – the husband being the manager of the Detroit Gas Company, which was interesting. Anyway, they were very very kind, and every weekend – if we had leave – they used to come to the base at Grosse

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Ile and pick us up and take us out, y'know, and show us sights and were very very hospitable, so that was interesting.

Anyway, after... I did quite a bit of flying at Grosse Ile...I think the aircraft was a Stearman biplane – I can't remember the model, but they were quite nice aircraft. I didn't really enjoy flying, I went solo after about twelve hours, but [chuckles] to be quite honest I found flying boring... the instructors were marine... American Marine pilots, mostly young, and they were very meticulous, always telling us to keep... if your engine fails, where were you going to land and all that sort of thing, and on one occasion we actually had engine failure, and we landed at a farm...I remember, I think it was in the middle of a maize crop, and the farmer came out in consternation because we'd ruined quite a bit of his land, and he wanted to know...when he discovered I was British he wanted to know if I'd just flown the Atlantic [chuckles] which was rather amusing.

So... this went on for some weeks – I think I did about fifty hours flying, and then, I was asked by er, Lieutenant Commander Jackson RN to report to his office where he advised me that I was... going to leave the course and would be returned to the UK to join the fleet somewhere, and that happened – I returned after about a couple of weeks spent in New York, which was very interesting, waiting for a ship.

I arrived back...I think, in Greenock, reported back to Devonport where I stayed for some weeks, and then was asked to report to a Flower Class corvette HMS Clematis, which was stationed at Sheerness, and I reported there... lovely little ship...very nice crew – I think the crew... I think totalled about thirty or forty, but they were all very, very nice chaps, because aboard a corvette the sleeping arrangement was very, very odd – they had a series of flat wooden bunks adjacent to each other in the mid-part of the ship – we used to – we didn't have a bunk allocated to us, if one person left we just hopped into the one which was available, and that went on, which was very, very good.

So, after some weeks we did North Sea convoys, and then Channel convoys, and we were under fire I remember, from the German batteries on the French coast; they used to lob over shells on the convoys we were escorting,

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in the hope of making a hit, but they never seemed to, and that went on for some time; we were all aware there was something going to happen, because there was a tremendous lot of rumours flying around about the invasion... up-coming invasion, and we continued these convoys, and then – we were based in Sheerness, but we used to go ashore at Southend quite a lot, if in that vicinity, and I always remember going up the tremendously long pier which we used to anchor off, and then, if we had a bit of leave we would trundle up this tremendously long causeway to town, and later to rejoin the ship at midnight which was good.

D-Day approached - we were ordered to pick up a convoy – going – heading for Arromanches but we didn't know that at the time, and my most vivid memory of the invasion was the tremendous number of aircraft flying over, as we were going cross-channel – there were literally hundreds of aircraft going over, obviously going in to drop their troops inland in anticipation of the invasion. Er...we eventually arrived off a little port called Arromanches where we escorted quite a number of LCA's ashore... some light fire... artillery fire and rifle fire, but not very much, and I remember, I was standing on the bridge as a lookout, and a bullet whizzed past my left ear at high-velocity as – “Good God, that was a close one,” but that was the nearest I came to being under fire at that time.

So we proceeded to escort ships across – we particularly remember the Mulberry caissons – the big – sort of – the huge tanks which were acting as temporary harbours – we escorted those across... and also a couple of ships with huge reels on them which turned out to be the Pluto fuel lines, and as they proceeded across, the reels disembarked their hoses and these were eventually connected up at the Mulberries, so the troops had plenty of petrol and diesel at their command.

So, this went on for some weeks... er, we moved from beach to beach, and at that time or some little time later, the Germans started firing their rockets over – particularly at London [interviewer's prompt] – something called the V-1, and I had the great honour of shooting one down – umm – with an Oerlikon, the rocket actually grazed Dungeness Lighthouse and exploded, so I was very glad it didn't hit the lighthouse, otherwise I would have been court martialled I think; but the Americans were particularly good at flying

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alongside these rockets and tipping their wings over so that they lost their sense of direction, and plunged to earth, exploding in the sea or on land; particularly, the army put up a most tremendous barrage at night, the whole of the coast was alive with gunfire shooting at these rockets, and they were quite successful in shooting a number down – unfortunately, a lot as we all know, got through to London, causing tremendous havoc.

And then the V-2's started going which we couldn't – we didn't know about but heard about, but they were beyond human intervention – they used to land unexpectedly, causing untold damage.

So there we are; I've got the invasion behind me; we've encountered the rockets; and then, yes, what occurred then sometime, I was asked to report to HMS *King Alfred* at Brighton, which was a training school for potential officers, and I went there, did a three-month course, and was commissioned as a sub-Lieutenant RNVR, temporary in brackets, and joined – we were sent up to the Clyde – to Fairfield's Yard, it was Govan, to join a Landing Ship Tank, which was in course of construction at that yard – I was the first officer to report, er... to Commander Bell, who was eventually to become flotilla leader of a flotilla of ten LST's, and the first job he gave me was he said "Dickie, I want you to – we're going down to the Far East, I want you to get as much booze as you can in the wardroom locker wine store," so I spent many days going round Glasgow to various whisky distilleries trying to cadge cases of Scotch [chuckles] out of them... and to be honest, was quite successful, 'cos we... when we eventually sailed, the wine locker was particularly full.

Commander Bell – he was a big chap about six six, heavily built, excellent seaman, had been in the Far East .. commanding oil vessels before the war, but he was a tremendous drinker in harbour – he never touched a drop at sea, but in harbour he used... he used to go...he used to go quite heavily on the malt stuff, and he used to try and get his young sub-lieutenants drunk, so [chuckles] so that... so that he could tease them, and allocate them difficult tasks.

So I stood by this LST for about probably two or three weeks, billeted on a Glasgow family, and I always remember they had a daughter who I think was [chuckles] trying to seduce me, but I avoided her advances - very fortunately.

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Anyway, we sailed – we sailed, we sailed for the Far East... I think the ship was flotilla leader, but they were building the ships at that time and we didn't have many and we sailed for Plymouth in company with one other LST, and we only had three other officers aboard at that particular time, so, it was watch-on-watch, and as a very inexperienced sub-lieutenant, I felt my responsibilities very heavily, but nothing untoward transpired, and we safely arrived at Plymouth where we picked up I think seven or eight other officers including a doc' – a doctor, who'd been recently commissioned – he was RNVR, and he - his father was a very prominent surgeon in London, and he turned out to be an absolutely marvellous chap –he was capable of carrying out all sorts of difficult operations at sea, as I'll recount later.

We eventually sailed for the Far East in company with, I think, three other LSTs, proceeding through the Bay, arriving at Gibraltar, where we oiled – ship - pretty slow... corvettes are not fast vessels, but they used to average about fifteen knots - the LSTs... average voyage speed was about ten, ten knots which was very, very slow really in comparison to a destroyer's which I also had experience of – an important anecdote has come to mind regarding my service on HMS *Escapade* – during an Atlantic convoy we needed oil, so we proceeded to the Azores to do so – the Azores being Portuguese-owned and neutral, at the time, and we oiled, and I recall, loading up – the ship loading up with a tremendous number of pineapple – pineapple which were in production on the Azores, at that time quite heavily – we loaded this ship up and I think they kept us going for about ten days, until we got back to harbour in the UK.

Anyway, while we oiled and then left – left about midday, and as we were leaving, to our amazement a German U-Boat was entering the harbour and we – the officers saluted each other, and all the ratings were waving at each other – we were quite astounded. Of course we realised that the island being neutral, it could accommodate warships of either... of any nation, and that's what occurred. Anyway, that was an interesting experience and made me think how futile war really was 'cos, here we were, waving to people who the next day were likely to blow us out of the water,

So, having, having arrived at Gib', we were ordered to proceed to Naples to pick up some Sherman flotation tanks for the oncoming invasion of Malaya,

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which was the intention of the British Government, and the Americans of course, but this was the bringing-about the downfall of Japan. We discovered the operation was called "Operation Zipper," and we were to land in Malaya, at some base in the future, and we were picking up these tanks from Naples which were then surplus to requirements – the German War having finished some weeks before; so we picked up fourteen Sherman tanks – we were in company then, I think, with five other LSTs in our flotilla, and proceeded to Aden, and then to Suez, through the Canal and across the Indian Ocean – the only episode of note, there being one of the LSTs – one of their ratings suffered appendicitis, so we had to transfer Lieutenant Roxburgh by boat to the other LST under very, very heavy seas running, so we successfully transferred him, with great difficulty I'll let you know, but we couldn't recover our boat because the sea conditions were too bad, so the crew had to jump up scrambling nets to come aboard again, and we sank our lovely motorboat by gunfire so it wouldn't be a hazard to other shipping; and we then proceeded - Doc' Roxburgh couldn't rejoin our ship, so we left him aboard the other LST until we reached Bombay where we refuelled.

I discovered... when we were in Aden – the captain, Commander Bell thought it would be very nice if we had some form of transport, and I remember – surreptitiously – a Jeep being hauled, being landed aboard as, I think it was stolen of course, but it landed on our - in one of our holds, and so, he was determined to have transport of his own, and it turned out that I was the only chap aboard – the only officer aboard who could drive, which was rather astonishing but this was in forty-three or forty-four, and I was commissioned to take him with this Jeep to Naval Headquarters in Bombay to pick up our orders, and drive him through the streets of Bombay in a Jeep with which I wasn't very familiar, was quite a feat of engineering, 'cos the Indians, they just would not take any notice or give way to road traffic.

So, we stayed in Bombay for a couple of weeks, made honorary members of the Saturday Club, which was an exclusive club which the Brits seemed to establish in all their ports, where we played tennis, and I always recall... instead of having two, you know - the Indians, they love helping other people, and so, having two ball boys or one ball boy playing tennis, they used to have about six, so we didn't have to stoop to pick up a ball or anything like

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that, which was great. Anyway, it was a lovely time in Bombay, and then sailed for Calcutta, which was to turn out to be our base, and we landed there accompanied this time, I think we had eight other LSTs in company, and we landed there doing various exercises off Calcutta, and then we were detailed to go up to Rangoon for some reason...to deliver some Indian troops for the Burmese War.

Our next port of call proved to be Aden, and we entertained our passengers with shoots, quizzes and deck games to keep up morale. We left Aden on 7th April forty-six – a passage to the UK calling at Port Said, Oran and Gibraltar. The only notable events during the voyage were the recovery of a man overboard by MSC 3007 which took only fifteen minutes – a really good recovery. Our diversion to Oran to land a seriously ill sailor – soldier rather – who happily recovered we later heard.

To much jubilation by all on board, we berthed at Spithead on 30th April 1946 and the ship finally paid off there. The total number of miles completed by LS3307 during its commission amounted to 34,968 miles, and over three thousand troops and civilians, 480 tanks and vehicles, and 3,800 tons of stores we delivered to strategic destinations during that time.

The ability of the LSTs – to beach virtually anywhere – their shallow draught and vast storage spaces ensured their gainful... er... deployment in all theatres of operation, and this was fully illustrated in both the European and Far Eastern campaigns.

On leaving the Navy in August forty-six, I joined the family agricultural-engineering businesses in Gloucester and Stafford, dealing in Ferguson and Massey-Harris equipment of all types. In 2015, I was invited to apply for a French decoration, and was honoured on returning from a trip abroad to find a letter from the French Embassy in London enclosing a medal and signature “Chevalier de la Legion d’honneur” which was a tremendous surprise, and what a really fine gesture on the part of the French, I thought. And that about brings it to an end, Hugh.

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Tony's WW2 history can be found on People's Collection Wales in the National Library of Wales:

<https://www.peoplescollection.wales/collections/1714201>

and on

Age Cymru Dyfed's West Wales Veterans' Archive:

<https://westwalesveteransarchive.com/tony-bird/>

