

Ralph Anthony “Tony” Bird (1924-). Royal Navy Freshwater East

West Wales Veterans’ Archive

Dates of Interviews: 25th & 28th January and 4th February 2021

Description

Born in Cowbridge in 1924 Ralph Anthony (Tony) Bird and was evacuated with his school to Lampeter, Ceredigion, during the first years of WW2. Tony joined the Royal Navy in 1942, serving as a Midshipman on the Destroyer, HMS Escapade, in both the Mediterranean and English Channel before been posted to the USA to undertake initial training as a Fleet Air Arm cadet pilot. Tony’s training was cut short and he was posted back the UK to join the Corvette, HMS Clematis, taking part in the D-Day invasion of Normandy. He was then posted as a Sub-Lieutenant to HMLST 3037, a Landing Ship Tank. Following the defeat of Germany, this LST was sent out to the Far East where it was heavily involved in repatriating civilian prisoners of war from Sumatra and Java and also British and Indian troops from Burma. Demobbed from the Navy in August 1946, Tony entered the family agricultural engineering business where he spent his career until retirement. In 2016 Tony was delighted to be made a Chevalier de la Légion d'honneur by the French Government and today continues to live in Freshwater East, Pembrokeshire.

In view of his three years spent as an evacuee in Lampeter, Tony has also been interviewed by the ‘People’s Voices in a People’s War: Aberystwyth at WW2’ project carried out by Aberystwyth University. Their blog can be found at:
<https://aberystwythatwarww2.blogspot.com/>

Early Years

Tony Bird was born on 2nd April 1924 in Cowbridge, Glamorgan. Tony’s family had an agricultural engineering business in Gloucestershire, and after attending a local school in Cowbridge he was educated at Wycliffe College in Stonehouse. Following the outbreak of WW2, the whole school was evacuated from Gloucestershire to Lampeter. Tony was an already a good shoot and took part in game shooting parties with friends during a period when food was under strict wartime rationing.

Royal Navy

Realising a boyhood dream, in March 1942 Tony joined the Royal Navy. After training in HMS Raleigh, Devonport, Tony joined the Fleet Destroyer HMS ESCAPADE, newly refitted after months of arduous Artic convoys. He served on many Atlantic convoys, culminating in Operation Torch, the invasion of North Africa. In his audio recording Tony recalls a strange if poignant wartime incident when HMS Escapade was just leaving the neutral post of the Azores (Portuguese territory) when a German U-Boat arrived in the port, passing close to them. Tony reports that the crews of both vessels stood on deck cheering and waving at each other. Yet he remarks that despite this apparent respect for each other, outside of this neutral territory ‘they would have tried to blow us out of the water’.

Back in the UK, Tony volunteered for re-training as a pilot in the Fleet Air Arm and was posted to the USA to train as a cadet pilot under the Admiral Towers scheme at Grosse Ile, Michigan. Tony recall being 'adopted' by a local family and treated very well. After around 50 flying hours on the Boeing PT17A 'Stearman', Tony was pulled out of training to return to the UK. There he joined HMS CLEMATIS, a Flower-class corvette as a Mid-Shipman. This small, but very seaworthy vessel, was engaged on the east coast and channel convoy duties, and often came under fire from German batteries on the French coast, plus receiving numerous attacks from German E boats.

D-Day

In June 1944 HMS Clematis took part in the D-Day landings, escorting landing craft to the beaches off the coast of Normandy. Clematis even shepherded the Pluto fuel pipe vessels to the Mulberry caissons. In his audio recording Tony recalls firing the Oerlikon guns on the deck of Clematis, shooting down a V1 buzz bomb which crashed into the sea, narrowly missing the Dungeness Lighthouse.

The Far East

Now commissioned as a Sub-Lieutenant R.N.V.R, Tony next joined HMLST 3037, a Landing Ship Tank, in the course of construction at Fairfields Yard, Goven, and he travelled up with the ship's Captain to organise the fitting-out of the ship. Aboard this new ship, Tony sailed for the Far East following the surrender of Germany.

Based at Calcutta, the ship joined the fleet assembling for Operation Zipper, the long awaited, invasion of Malaya and sailed for Port Swettenham in September 1945. However, during the voyage, the first Atomic bombs were unleashed on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and although the ship beached and unloaded the tanks near Port Swettenham, the Japanese troops had entirely conceded. Tony describes this as a great relief as the crew had been worried of imminent kamikaze attacks during their approach to the beaches.

The following months were spent repatriating civilian prisoners of war from Sumatra and Java and also British and Indian troops from Burma, but the highlight proved to be that HMLST 3037 was the first allied warship to reach Bangkok after the Japanese surrender.

In October 1945 the ship was directed to Saigon to unload the French aircraft carrier FS. BEARN which was unable to traverse the heavily mined river and, after many trips, succeeded in landing over 200 military vehicles - 800 French troops at Saigon Harbour.

HMLST 3037 then proceeded to Nha Trang in French Indochina to evacuate over 1000 women and children in company with 'FS TRIOMPHANTE'. It then returned to Singapore and Rangoon for repatriation duty, involving Indian and British troops for conveyance to Calcutta. For Tony this proved a very interesting period and introduced him to the delights of very good Sikh cooking!

In March 1946, the ship was ordered to Ceylon to load troops and equipment for passage to the UK and left TRINCOMALEE Harbour on 25th March, berthing at Spithead on 30th April 1946 where she finally paid off. Tony was released from the Navy in August of that year.

Post-Naval Life

Tony joined the family agricultural engineering business in Gloucester, Cowbridge and Stafford dealing in Ferguson and Massey-Harris equipment of all types. He and wife Florence had three children. Florence was herself an officer in Royal Navy Wrens during the war and was in the first party of female troops to land on the Normandy beaches following the D-Day invasion. Florence' extraordinary story has also been collected for the West Wales Veterans' Archive.

Postscript: In 2016 Tony returned from a trip abroad to find a letter from the French Embassy in London honoring him with the medal and insignia of Chevalier de la Légion d'honneur which he describes as really fine gesture on the part of the French.