

Unseen stories:

Surviving the Arctic convoys

In this three-part Remembrance Special, blind veteran Alec Penstone shares his fascinating stories from the Second World War with our Military Lead, Tim Eckersley.

Part 1: Tracking down the enemy as a London teen

Tim: Welcome to this incredibly special Blind Veterans Remembrance Podcast. My name is Tim Eckersley and I'm the Military and Engagement Lead for Blind Veterans UK. I'm a Royal Navy veteran, having served 22 years and reached the rank of Chief Petty Officer as a Physical Trainer.

Today, we have the absolute privilege to hear from one of our last surviving World War II veterans involved in the Arctic convoys in D-Day.

He's a man that at 98 years of age has achieved more than some of us could do in two lifetimes. He's met our late Queen; our new King; a US President and two Prime Ministers, telling one of them off actually.

He's here today to talk to us about his life and career in the Royal Navy throughout the Second World War.

It gives me great pleasure to introduce World War II veteran, Alec Penstone. And joining us to support Alec, are his friends James, Tanya and George.

Welcome to you all and thank you, Alec, for speaking to Blind Veterans UK for this very special podcast.

Alec: Thank you very much indeed, Tim, for the opportunity of not only speaking to you, but a grateful thanks for all you're doing for us blind veterans.

My name is Alec William George Penstone. I was born on the 23rd of April 1925. And because you're always named first born son after the father, so my name was Alec.

And, of course, William came in because William Shakespeare was born on the same day, and also died 52 years later on the same day. George, because of the St. George and the Dragon, and just in case you're wondering, no, I did not marry the dragon. I met a beautiful lady that I met soon after I joined the Royal Navy. [laughter]

Tim: Right, Alec, so the war broke out on September 1939, and at that time you were 14, weren't you, living in Tottenham in North London. So, what was that like at 14 years old when the war broke out?

Alec: My father had died just a week after my 14th birthday, which was in April 1939.

After Dunkirk, when we stood alone, waiting for Germany to invade us, which we were fully expected to do, I decided, as well as working in the munition factory, I would join the ARP as a part-time messenger. This was because at that time they were bombing all the airfields in and around London to try and destroy the RAF.

So anyway, I decided I would try and do a bit more and, at one particular time, I've just come off a night duty and the air raid siren went off.

A bus or a lorry had knocked down a wall, a sandbag wall, from an air raid shelter. It was built half on the pavement and half in the road, and I had to make sure that it was rebuilt. So, I got up as far as the shelter of the yard, council yard, saw the men in there, and they agreed that they would come down, renew all the sandbags, and rebuild the wall.

And at that precise moment, there was a battle going on above with the Hurricanes and Spitfires. And, suddenly, a German plane swooped down and machine gunned a train standing at Finsbury Park station in North London, set it alight and then, just for the sheer hell of it, decided to carry along the railway lines to the next railway bridge which I was sheltering under.

In the meantime, he was machine gunning all the people out shopping on the Saturday afternoon, and there was glass and bullets and everything else lying all over the place. As luck would have it, the only gun that was defending the bridge was a Bofors gun, a low angle anti-aircraft gun. As the plane swooped down, it was hit fair and square and zoomed up in the air, and I looked out from underneath the bridge and saw it was on fire.

I knew the only open space the pilot could see was a big recreation ground called Markfield Recreation Ground, which is about a mile and a half away. I decided that's where he was going to try and make his land because he didn't want to land on the rooftops of the town. Luckily, I was on one of the old bikes - grocery bikes - with the metal front on it where you put the basket. It was a fixed wheel, but it was downhill.

So, I'm pedalling away like mad, and I met a policeman also on a bike, and I called to him, "Markfield Rec!", and he gave me the thumbs up. And together we went to the back entrance of the Markfield Rec.

When we got there, the pilot had already landed. He was standing there looking in absolute utter amazement at a group of about 40 men and women fighting each other for his silk parachute, which had drifted off down the field. My policeman went up and took the pilot's revolver out from his holster, emptied it out, and put one of the shells back up the spout, waved it in his face, and said, "Put your hands behind your back," and in perfect Oxford BBC accent, the pilot said the words, "I'm a prisoner of war, and I demand respect."

We both looked at each other, Where did that voice come from? He's a German pilot, dressed in all his uniform, and he's speaking perfect English. Turns out he was educated at Oxford before the war. Anyway, the policeman said, "You'll get more than respect if I call those women over and tell them that 20 minutes ago you were machine gunning their families while out shopping. I won't be able to guarantee your safety. Now do as you're told."

We took him up to a factory at the top and they called up for transport because, you know, we didn't have mobile phones or anything like that. And a motorcycle combination came through the gates, driven by a policeman. We put the pilot in the side car.

My policeman got on the back of the motorbike, and left me with two bikes, so off they went. I said, "What about your bike?"

"Leave it by the warden's post. I'll pick it up later."

It was a half mile walk with two bikes pushed up hill... it just ain't no justice!

Tim: Did you keep this bike?

Alec: I had it for three weeks until a wall fell on it. [laughter]

James: The other story from that time, Alec, which is very striking, is when there was a bombing raid and you had to help out with an air raid shelter.

Alec: Oh, that was on September 15th, which is now Battle of Britain Day. That's when Hitler tried to burn London.

Tim: Okay. Wow.

Alec: He dropped hundreds of bombs first of all, followed by high explosives. The Air Raid Warden's Post was built in the yard of an old piano factory in Tottenham - made of concrete, bricks and that sort of thing - at the end of a row of houses. We turned up as a stick of bombs was coming down. We always counted them, about five or six in a stick.

Each one got nearer and nearer, until there was a massive great explosion and one of the houses' lights went out. We rushed outside because the post warden also lived in the same road. He was worried about his family.

We found that a bomb had dropped between the air raid shelter - which was the old Anderson shelter in the back garden - and the house. It had brought the whole other side of the house down on top of the air raid shelter, on top of the entrance. The gas main promptly caught fire and sent flames circling up in the air of gas, coal gas as it was in those days, burning brightly.

And, of course, once the Germans saw the flames there, they were trying to spread them, and drop it more bombs on it. We knew there were four people in the air raid shelter - in the Anderson shelter - because we'd help them build the bunks in there. And because you couldn't get in the front, I was given a torch and a spanner to go around to the back.

I was 15 years of age then. I had to undo the escape hatch at the back, which is about two-foot square of corrugated iron. It would open from the outside. I heard the screaming coming from inside, and I knew people were still alive in there. When I finally got the back off and climbed through, I couldn't see anything but thick smoke inside, and the screaming was still going on. I found that the whole floor of the air raid shelter had been lifted upwards and the two men in the top bunk were pressed hard against the top of the air raid shelter and the two women were in bunks underneath.

Well, I managed to get the women out, but they were like bags of jelly, as if they had no bones. I had to pull them out. It was just like... a terrible feeling. I passed them out my friends outside who pulled them out into the road. They were both dead. Then I got one of the men down from the top, he was dead; then the other one stopped screaming so I knew he was gone as well.

I managed to get all four of them out. I mean, I was only a little titch myself but, somehow, I managed to pull them out onto the road.

When the taxi came along as an ambulance, with the body bags in it, we couldn't take away the fourth body until we found the man's left foot, which had been cut off during the explosion.

All this time, the flames were shooting outside, and Jerry was doing his bombing raid. As pure luck would have it, a whistle of bombs came down and hit the gas main further up the road which turned our gas off. It just died down suddenly. I mean, the flames were still going high because all the wood in the house was burning, all the furniture, the beds and everything else like that, but we got away with that one.

Tim: What a fantastic story of courage at just 15 years of age!

Alec: My mother was a war widow - my father had been in Queen Mary's Hospital, Roehampton, for a number of years, completely paralysed from his wounds from the First World War. So, I promised them that I would not join the army. So, I made it my business to make sure that I joined the Royal Navy, or the Merchant Navy at the time.

And as soon as I was 17, although I was doing a 12-hour shift in the factory - 12-hour nights one week, 12-hour days the next week - every time I was offered my days, I would go down to Dock Street in London to sign on for the Merchant Navy. But all they offered me was Engine Room, and I wanted Deckhand.

So, in the end they said to me, "Go down to Edgeware and join the real navy." Three coughs later I was signed up.

Tim: So, June the 16th. Right. And Alec, you joined as a, ASDIC, was it? An anti-submarine detection investigating committee?

Alec: I joined as an ordinary mate, first of all, but after two weeks square bashing [a military drill] down to Devonport. I was asked if I wanted either Radar or ASDICS. When I asked which paid the best - because my mother was a war widow and every penny helped - they said ASDICS does. So, I put my name down for ASDICS. Next thing I know I'm sent off to Campbeltown in Scotland to be trained as a submarine detector.

Tim: So, I understand that your first draft was actually on a World War I submarine.

Alec: That is correct.

Tim: That was part of your first Arctic convoy, wasn't it?

Alec: Yes, what happened was, I was told to go to Scarpa Flow; pick up a boat at Scarpa. Well, a boat to me was like a drifter. But when I got there, I was told to go down to the third boat alongside, after I'd been given something to eat, and I found she was a submarine.

I met the officer on the watch there - he must have been about eight weeks older than me. He was Wavy Navy (Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve); his daddy must have bought him a commission in the reserves.

I said, "Well, excuse me, sir, but I didn't volunteer for submarines."

He said, "Hard luck - take it up with your drafting office, if we get back."

I said, "Where are we going, sir?"

He said, "Murmansk."

Well, having heard the old salts talking about the Russian run, I thought my naval career is going to finish before I've even started.

He said, "Go down below and I will show you your bunk."

Well, I got down there and the leading seamen said, "There's your bunk."

I said, "Well, there's somebody asleep in it."

He said, "Yeah, it's your oppo. When he gets out, you get in." He said, "Don't worry about it." He said, "You get ten pence a day extra for that," which I thought was pretty good going.

So anyway, we set sail just after midnight on that day. And once off the Icelandic coast, the captain decided he was going to try and do a dive.

So, when we got down at 30 foot, there's more water coming in through broken seals and loose rivets than what was outside. So, we had to blow the tanks rather quickly and return to the surface.

I remember the skipper sending a message to the lead of the escorts, saying, "In the event of an air attack. I intend to remain on the surface."

Back come the answer: "So do we all. Congratulations. See you in Murmansk." And that was it...

It was not fit for purpose. We were turned round, just at Bear Island, to go back with the convoy returning to England. And while I was back in the UK - I arrived back in the early hours of Christmas Eve - I was given seven days leave because they didn't know what to do with me.

So, I was back in London only to find that my mother and brother had been evacuated because of the bombing and I had nowhere to go for Christmas dinner. I had a ration card, but all the shops were shut. So, I thought, "Well, I've got to find somewhere to have some Christmas dinner." So, I decided I would go to see my aunt, my mother's sister. My two cousins were in the Navy as well.

So, when I went to them, there was a young lady there who introduced herself as my cousin's fiancé. They were going to get married on his next long leave.

She lived out at Harwich, and I was asked to walk her home. It was pitch black by the time I got to her house, and she said, "Come in to meet the family." And there was this gorgeous 17-year-old young lady, an acrobatic dancer. She'd been given a month's leave from a factory where she made aircraft seats to do entertainment. And the rest is history.

I fell in love with her, and we married two years later.

Tim: Wow, what a chance encounter, just based on the fact that you were going to spend Christmas alone!

END OF PART 1