

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 3: D-Day, the KGB and a very special wedding

Tim: Alec, you took part in an astonishing ten and a half convoys, and were involved in the D-Day invasion in France on the 6th of June, 1944. Can you tell us a little bit about D-Day?

Alec: D-Day? Not a lot because I was two decks down below and all I had was a telephone. We weren't even told where we were.

What happened was, we left Glasgow in the early hours of the morning. I was on middle watch and, when we came up I looked out of the embarkation space because we weren't allowed on the flight deck.

I could see on one side of it a massive shipping as far as now I could see, right over to the horizon. Every type of shipping. The waves were quite heavy and strong. And on the other side I could see houses and trees and everything else.

When I inquired where we were, nobody knew, not until one of the bunting tossers [sailors with signal flags] come down from the bridge and said, "I know where we are. We're off the Isle of Wight." He said, "I've just seen the Needles."

So that's the only time we knew where we were. We never ever thought that the invasion was going to be done this way because on all our trips up to Murmansk there was so much activity going off in the Scottish islands - camouflage nets and tanks and God knows what else, and a whole lot of air traffic going on... We really thought the invasion was going to be through Norway. We were convinced of it, and it was only

when we got a swing around the anchor in Sandown Bay that I realised that this was it.

Tim: Right, what ship were you serving on at that point?

Alec: Campania.

Tim: Oh, you're still on Campania.

Alec: Yeah, I kept on her. We were cover force. We weren't part the D-Day invasion. We were just cover. My job was to stop any U boats coming out of Brest, which was the U boat pen there. Stop them from coming up and hitting the fleet going across.

I mean, I never saw anything of the landings going on. You could hear what was going on, especially when their big guns opened up to start bombarding the coast and the planes went up there. They were all painted with the white stripes overnight to signify they were British planes.

Everything had to come second hand from one of our mates on the bridge who left the telephone open so we could hear the noise going on up there. We were 27 feet beneath the waterline.

Tim: So, I need to ask, Alec, I have it from a very reliable source - James being sat with you - that you had a run in with the KGB. So, what happened there?

Alec: Yes, well, in Murmansk, yeah. They had bombing raids every half hour so, we used to get a load of air raids all the time. Any medical supplies that we could spare would go around. And because I was a spare hand - I was Cox in a 60-foot motorboat, which wasn't used up in the Arctic waters except once - I was always fished out.

The KGB man would escort the most senior officer on board, sometimes with a midshipman with the captain's coat on like, and his cat, to go to the hospital.

If we showed the bag to the guard, he would look through it and just make sure there's no contraband in it - cigarettes or anything like that - and then hand it back. Then next thing you know, the KGB man would then open up the bag and have a look in. We saw him take different packets and put them in his pocket.

When I went to speak to the officer, one look told me not to say a word. Be quiet, don't say nothing.

Tim: What was he taking?

Alec: All the May & Baker [medical supplies], the Penicillin ones [needed to treat gangrene].

Tim: Right.

Alec: He put him in his pocket and, anyway, when we were ready to leave, I went round to the various ships collecting what medical supplies they can afford for the way home.

And I saw one of the six birth attendants onboard my ship and explained to him I wanted two May & Bakers tablets taken out and fill 'em up with number nines, which are constipation pills.

And sure enough, the KGB man dived down there and picked them up. I never saw him next time. I never saw him again. I was surprised. But, yeah, one way of getting me own back. [laughter]

Tim: So, Alec, on September 1945, the Second World War ended. So, how did you feel at the end of the war? And what was next in store for you?

Alec: Well, 1945... well, when the war finished over here, our ship was looking for three young boats that hadn't surrendered. We finally found they'd scuttled their boats in a remote Norwegian port and made their way back, if they ever did get back, through Norway, back to Germany.

And so consequently, by the time I got back to England, VE day was all over. All the bunting was down and everything else, you see. And I was given 16 days leave -14 days leave and two days VE leave. I went back to a barracks in Scotland and there was a notice up there: "Wanted for early release, anyone with knowledge of the building trade, to help rebuild our towns and cities. Bricklayers. Woodworkers, electricians..."

As I was a qualified electrician at that I thought, this is lovely! So, I put my name down, came back to London and... I'd already got engaged to my lovely girlfriend just after D-Day - I told her what happened.

Her company gave her two weeks' notice, a leave of absence to spend with me. And sure enough, at the end of that time, I thought, right, this is great. I'm going back up to Scotland and then I'm going to be put somewhere in London.

When I got back to my barracks I was sent for. They said, "Have we got a draft for you, son? Golden Hind."

Golden Hind? Golden Hind?

It's HMS Amethyst really, but you go to Golden Hind first. It's a transit camp.

But where's the Amethyst?

Oh, out of the Yangtze.

I said, "No, I put my name down to rebuild London!"

"No, no, too late son, you're wanted out of the Far East."

So, I said, "Well, I want a vacation leave. Sixteen days leave!" I said, "I want embarkation leave!"

"No, you can't have it."

I said, "Yes, I can. King's Regulations says I can!"

So anyway, they said, well, the only thing to do is give you seven days leave, which includes two days travelling.

So, I came all the way back from Scotland again, met my young lady outside the factory - she thought I'd deserted because I'd only been back 24 hours. She goes, "What? What's happened?" I said, "I've got a draft." So, I said, "Will you marry me?"

And she said, "Well, I've got to ask my mum and dad", because, I mean, we were both minors at the time.

So anyway, she said, "Yeah, I'd love to marry you." And her parents, they must have thought I was still a good catch, anyway, because they agreed.

So, we went to see the vicar of our local church and he said, "I'd love to marry you," he said, "But unfortunately I need three weeks to call the banns [announce the intention to wed]."

I said, "Well, I haven't got three weeks, I've only got four days!"

He said, "I can't do it. I'll tell you what, have a civil service and I'll come and bless you."

She said, "No, I want a church wedding."

"Oh, okay." So, he said, "Well, the only other thing is if you go down to Westminster Abbey, ask for audience with the Archbishop of Canterbury. Tell him your story and he may be able to help you."

So, next day, which was just three days before I was due to go back, we got a train down. They said, "Well, he's at Fulham Palace at the present moment, but I'll get him over here."

He came over, and the first thing we had to do was swear on the Bible that we hadn't touched each other. We were absolutely pure, there was no question at all about that.

And then, he said, “Well, now,” he said, “I’ll tell you what, I will marry you now in one of the chapels of the Abbey with two of the Abbey men as your witnesses.”

I said, “Will you?”

He said, “Yeah.”

I said, “Oh, thank you very much!”

My fiancée said, “No, I want me mum and dad there!”

“Oh, I can’t organise that for you. Oh dear.” He said, “But what I can do is to give you a special license which tells any Church of England vicar he’s got to marry you with three hours’ notice.”

I’ve got this beautiful parch with a big red seal on it, both signed by him. I’ve still got it on the wall.

So, I went back and saw her vicar at the local church, and he said, “Well, I can’t do it tomorrow because I’ve got two baptisms on. I can do it on Saturday.”

I said, “No, I’ve got to be back on Saturday!”

I said, “Well, the only thing to do, I’ll send a telegram to my Skipper.”

Well, my Skipper must have had a sympathetic ear because he gave me an extra 48 hours.

So, I got married at two o’clock on a Saturday afternoon and seven o’clock on the Monday morning I said goodbye to my lovely new wife, and I went off to Liverpool to go out to the Far East.

Tim: And, most importantly, though, was it with her parents there?

Alec: Oh, yes. Yeah. Lovely wedding. Beautiful wedding. Yeah. But I still slept on the floor that night. She slept in the bed. That was desperate. That was her idea.

Tim: Was that a sign of things to come, was it? [laughter]

Alec: I was just so pleased that I'd married her. Come the Monday, when I left, I picked up the Manxman [ship] at Liverpool and we went out to the Panama Canal.

Tim: Alec, you've lived a remarkable life and remained extremely busy throughout. You're a bit of an unstoppable force, really. I'm told that you're the nation's oldest poppy seller. And next year we've got the 80th anniversary of the D-Day celebrations. So, what does Remembrance Day really mean to you?

Alec: My father, when he was severely wounded in the Second Battle of the Somme, he was left for dead. It means to me so very, very much, not only for my father, but all the others. When you go... have you been to [the Normandy Memorial in] France? Have you seen it?

Tim: No, I've not, but I'm intending to go next year.

Alec: To me, it, it means so much that people were so willing to give up their lives for our country and to fight for what they believed to be their way of wanting of life.

It meant so much really, and still does. I'm just so lucky to be alive at this time. I don't know why... They say the devil looks after his own, but there you go. But I don't know why I'm still spared to meet people like you, like these lovely people that are looking after me, especially with George and Tanya on here, wonderful friends and relations, and to think that they've given up their time and efforts and everything else just to look after me.

This year is going to be something special because George and I... we're over in Normandy this year and I managed to find my cousin's grave. He was one of the Red Devils that dropped in just before D-Day.

Tim: Oh, that's incredible. That's incredible. So obviously you've co-authored a book called My Ten and a Half Artic Conveys and the Rest of My Life. James, could you expand on it a little bit and just maybe tell how people listening could get a copy?

James: Yes, certainly. It's a paperback and we sell it for £16 plus postage. We've also done a DVD. The book is of Alec's whole life, from a little child up until recently. The DVD is Alec talking about his Second World War experience. That's two hours, 20 minutes long, and it's £12 plus postage. Now anybody who's interested only needs to send me an email. My email address is jamesking21@sky.com. I can send them back more details.

The book is full of amazing stories - a lot of which he hasn't had time to tell you. And the museums are showing great interest in the DVD, which we could also deliver that as a memory stick if people prefer it for £7.99, or £10 on CD.

Tim: Look, Alec, James, Tanya, George, thanks very much for your time today. Thanks for sharing your stories with us. I'm sure this will be enjoyed by many people, both young and old. It's been a real honour to listen and explore parts of your incredible life, Alec.

Alec: I didn't think it was incredible. It's just these people did.

Tim: Don't say that. Nobody's going to buy your book! [laughter]

Alec: Tim, thank you so much. You are more than welcome on my humble abode anytime. You've got my telephone number. Please don't hesitate. I've got books and photos and God knows what else. I don't know what's going to happen to it when I go, but it will probably finish up in a skip. [laughter]

Tim: All right. As I said, it was really great to meet all of you. Thanks very much for your time. And hopefully we can maybe even do something again. You've got plenty more stories that I haven't been told.

And hopefully, fingers crossed, I might even see you next year in France.

James and Alec: Oh, you will do. You will do. That'd be great. Fantastic. Right. Yeah. Thanks so much. I'll let you go. And if you want to talk again, just let us know.

Tim: Well, I will drop you an email as I'd like a copy of the book. Signed as well, please, Alec!

James: They've all been signed. They've all been signed.

Tim: Okay. Yeah, I'll drop you an email, but thanks very much, guys. Great to talk to you.

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