

MY WAR SERVICE

Life in Royal Navy Special Signals during World War II



ALEC M^cCREEDY

Dedicated to my family



*With my parents, brothers and sister
(I'm at the front in the middle)*

Background

I was born in East Looe, Cornwall, on 5th May 1924, the youngest of four children (three boys, one girl). Till I was five, my family lived in a house on Lower Chapel Street, along with three other families. We all shared one toilet!

We then moved to a council house on the other side of the river, in West Looe, in a new development called Woodlands View. We walked down the hill to school, or into town, and back again every day – and I had to do it in callipers because I'd been born with my right foot turned in. My left foot straightened itself, but when I was twelve, I had to go to hospital in Plymouth to have an operation to straighten my right foot. There was no 'National Health Service' in those days, remember, so all our medicines and my operation had to be paid for. I think perhaps my parents had some sort of health insurance policy that would have helped towards the cost.

When war was declared on 3rd September 1939, I was an apprentice painter and decorator. I was also in the scouts, and we were asked to act as messengers during air raids, as there were very few people with phones. I was messenger for the Fire Brigade in West Looe, when a German plane flew over the East Looe headland. It then came back towards the bridge to try to bomb it, and the firemen pushed me into a corner and piled on top to protect me from the blast. The bombs landed in fields where the present school is, and it gave us quite a scare!

I also joined the Home Guard as soon as I could, and it was through them that I received the only instruction I ever received on how to fire a rifle. When I was 17, I tried to join the Fleet Air Arm, as I was desperate to join the Navy but, unfortunately, I didn't have the necessary qualifications. So, I had to wait another year before I could join up.

My two older brothers were boat-builders, which meant they were in a 'Reserved Occupation' – they were not allowed to

join the forces because their jobs were an important part of the war effort. My family probably weren't too worried about my wanting to join the navy, because they thought my childhood foot problems would prevent me being accepted. But on Tuesday 5th May 1942 – my 18th birthday – I travelled to Plymouth and volunteered for the Navy. I passed my medical and aptitude tests, and was informed that I would be called up in due course.

At the end of August 1942, my call-up papers arrived.

Joining up

I received my instructions and a Railway Warrant (by post), telling me to travel to Plymouth Station on 1st September 1942. There I met Ken Harding (from Falmouth). The RTO (Railway Train Officer) gave us warrants and told us to go to Paddington and spend the night at the Union Jack Club, then get a train from Euston at a certain time the following morning.

As neither Ken nor I had travelled to London on our own before – in fact, I'd never been further than Bristol, and that was with my parents – we had quite an exciting and anxious time on the underground in order to carry out these instructions.

When we arrived at Euston Station on Tuesday morning, we joined hundreds of others waiting for the same train! After a long, slow journey we arrived at Skegness, where Butlin's Holiday Camp had been taken over by the Royal Navy and was now given the name HMS Royal Arthur.

After five weeks, during which time we were issued with our uniforms, learned to march, row boats (tethered in the swimming pool), tie knots, do physical exercises etc, we were dispersed to various destination for training in whatever job we had been selected to do.



*September 1942 – with my chalet mates
at HMS Royal Arthur, Skegness*

So, on 9th October 1942, twenty-eight of us arrived in Brighton, at a training school known to the navy as HMS Vernon, for training as Ordinary Telegraphist (SO). At first, we thought 'SO' meant 'Special Operations', but were informed it meant 'Special Operator'. We were part of the 'Y Service'. We were told that we had to read morse at over 30 words per minute to pass; a 'word' consisted of five letters or figures. Our instructors were Post Office staff.

In Brighton, we were billeted with various families. I and several others stayed in the house of an elderly couple, not far from our place of training, which in peace time was St Dunstan's school for the blind. The blind people had been evacuated to a safer place.

For many weeks, we listened and learned Morse Code, slowly at first, then the speed was increased so that when we left on 8th February 1943 we were able to read morse at the required 30 words per minute or more.

On February 9th 1943, our class was moved to Eastbourne, where several of us were billeted in what had been the 'School of Domestic Economy'. We assembled each morning and marched to our new place of instruction 'St Bedes', normally a school for girls, situated at the extreme western end of Eastbourne promenade. It reopened for girls after the war and is still in use today!

St Bedes had become known to the Navy as *HMS Victory III*. During the 7 weeks there, we learned various radio procedures, and the operation of HF/DF in finding which direction a signal was coming from. It had proved very useful in locating U-Boats during the Battle of the Atlantic.

We completed our radio training on 26th March 1943 and expected to be sent to a warship. Imagine our surprise and disappointment when about 20 or so of us were drafted to *Cheadle, Stoke-on-Trent*!!

Special Operators (Y Service)

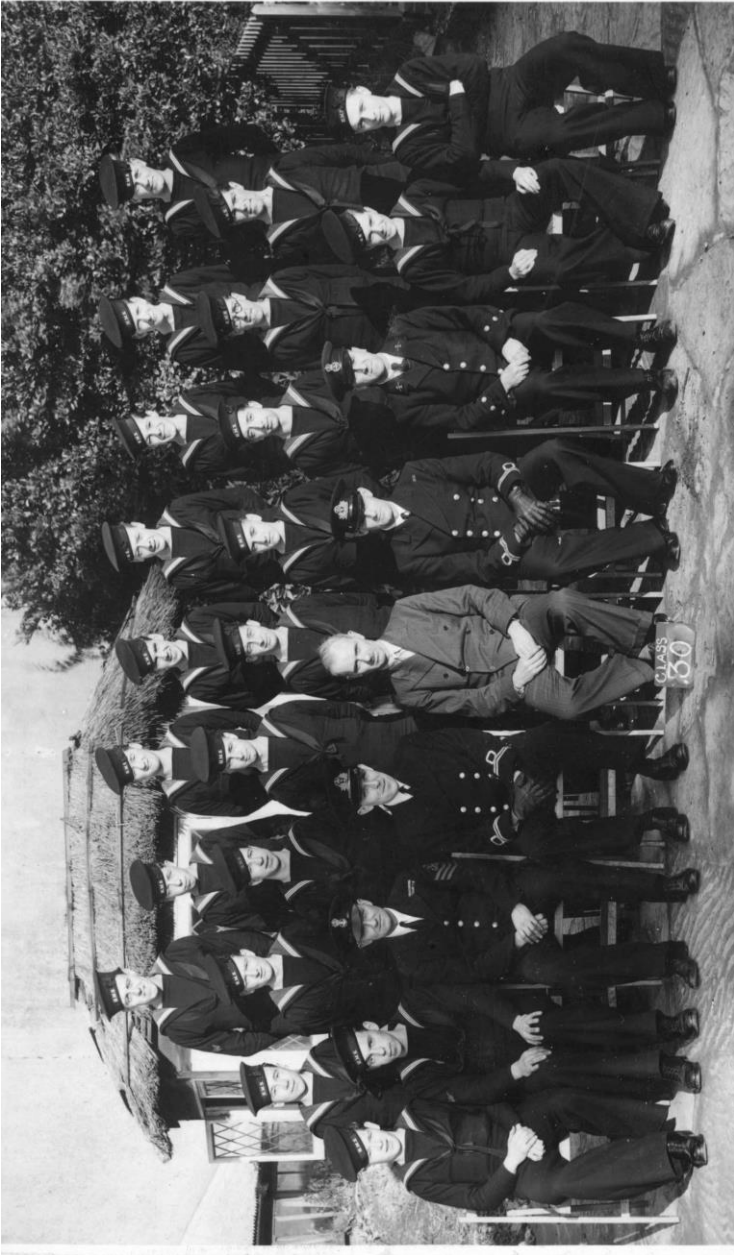
All sections of the Y service – Army, Navy, air force and civilian, had special selection procedures when recruiting their operators. They had to pass the IQ test above a certain score, be assessed as being capable of working under pressure, have the patience to sit for hours waiting for enemy signals, and never talk about what they did.

Forces special operators were taught Morse code, wireless procedures and electromagnetism – all alongside their military training.

From 'The Secret Listeners' by Sinclair McKay

The Admiralty had trained many ‘Y’ operators to intercept German naval signals, but soon realised when the Russian convoys started that they had no operators trained to intercept German aircraft signals from where they were based in Norway.

For the first convoys they ‘borrowed’ RAF operators, until their own Navy operators could be trained by the RAF at Cheadle.



February 1943 – HMS Vernon, Brighton (Middle row, first on left)

We travelled by train to Stoke-on-Trent, then had about an hour to wait at Stoke station for a connection to Cheadle – which had a railway station in those days – and arrived in Cheadle about 5pm on 27th March 1943.

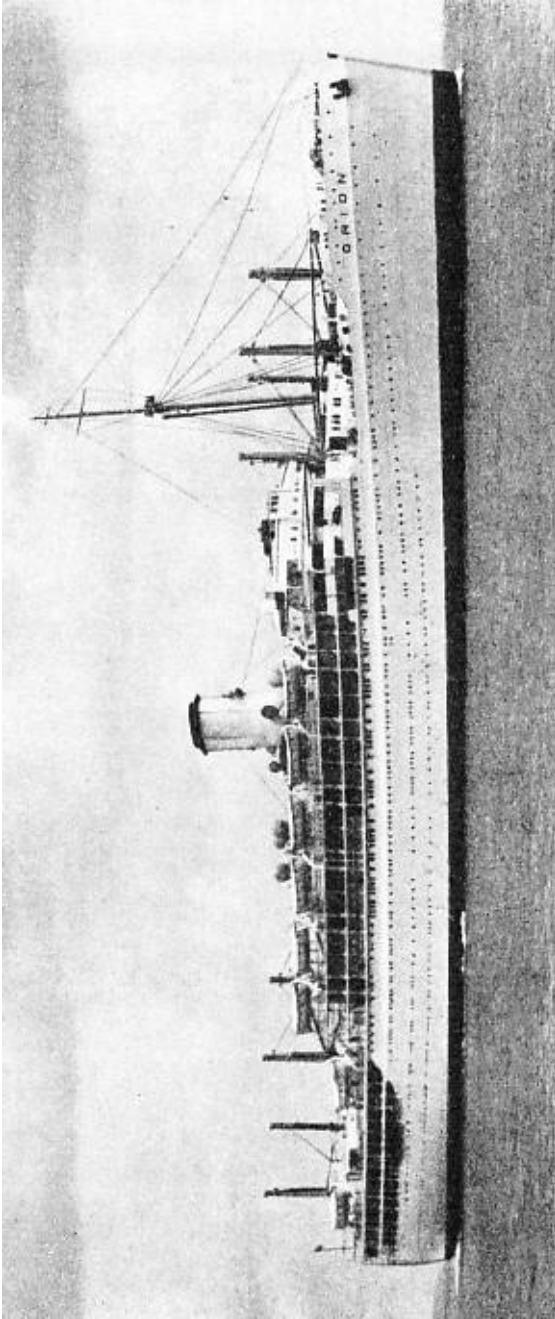
We were met at the station by RAF personnel, loaded on to a covered lorry and taken all around Kingsley and Cheadle, dropping people off at various places. I was billeted with Mr and Mrs Bradshaw and their son Victor at Harbourne Crescent. At that time, if there was a spare room in a house, it could be used as a billet for service personnel.

Going to Sea

My first posting to RAF Cheadle was surprisingly short. On 9th April I was drafted with about 24 others, which included more experienced operators, to join the *RMS Orion* troop ship on the Clyde, and within a short time we started on a voyage to the Mediterranean – via *South Africa*. Of course, we had no idea where we were going. The ship – which had just been refitted to take 7,000 people - was packed with personnel from all branches of the forces, and eating and sleeping conditions were very cramped and limited.

Our first port of call was Freetown, where a few people disembarked. We were there about a day or so. The local boats came alongside, and the natives dived into the harbour to retrieve any coins which were thrown by the troops.

After leaving Freetown, the next item of interest was on May 6th 1943, when the 'Crossing the Equator' ceremony took place, with various “volunteers” being covered in soap suds (or something similar) and then flung into the swimming pool. Considering that there were six or seven thousand people on the ship, it's remarkable that certificates were given to anyone who wanted one. (Paper, remember, was in short supply!)



RMS Orion

Various things were organised to try to break the boredom during the long voyage, such as games of 'Housey Housey' (now known as Bingo), card games, contests such as boxing etc. However, as the weather was mostly sunny and hot, we just enjoyed the voyage as much as we were able (bearing in mind that German U-boats operated along the African coast and might have sunk the ship at any moment).

Several days later, we reached Cape Town, where some people disembarked and others joined the ship. We then took a short voyage along the coast to Durban. Here shore leave was given and we enjoyed visiting the town and going to a restaurant. There was no 'blackout' and it was wonderful to see everything light up at night. It was too good to last and our party – along with a few thousand more – were transferred to a smaller vessel (someone said it was a Belgian ship) but it was not up to the standard of the *RMS Orion*, such as it was. I believe the *Orion* sailed on to India and Ceylon. However, we hugged the coast of Africa and eventually reached the bottom end of the Suez Canal.

We were the last to leave the ship, having spent a day or two helping to tidy up the ship after most of the troops had left. When we landed at Suez, we were put on to a train which – after a long, hot journey – took us to the north end of Suez, and then by lorry to *HMS Sphinx*, which was a tented establishment outside Alexandria. It was really a naval transit camp, and people spent only a short time there before posting on to their next destination. On one day whilst we were there, some of us were taken to the entrance to the harbour and told to look out for enemy midget submarines attempting to enter the harbour. This was because the Italians had perfected what became known as Underwater Chariots. They adapted torpedoes so that two men wearing breathing apparatus could sit astride and travel on the surface of the water, then submerge long enough

to enter a harbour; the crew could then attach limpet mines under a ship's hull. This they had succeeded in doing on 26th November 1942 when they entered Alexandria harbour and seriously damaged the battleships *HMS Queen Elizabeth* and the *Valiant*.

HMS Largs, and Sicily

A few days later we were driven to the harbour, and boarded a small liner packed with service personnel. We were taken along the coast to Tripoli. On arrival, we were allocated a sort of open-air courtyard with pillars – so we could sling our hammocks at night! Again, it was a day or two before we received instructions to be ready at six in the morning when a lorry would pick us up. So, we climbed into the back of the open lorry when it arrived in the morning. We were given sandwiches and bottles of water for the journey, which lasted all day, until we reached Sfax in Tunisia. By that time it was dusk. We were taken to the harbour, put aboard a motor launch and embarked aboard *HMS Largs*, a HQ ship which was to be our ‘home’ for the next month or so.

The sea was thick with ships of all kinds, and later that night all set sail for Sicily, to take part in the allied invasion.

HMS Largs had very tall masts which were adorned with lots of wireless aerials. She was one of several HQ ships, and their main function was to act as wireless relay stations for the landing forces. This was necessary because the Army radio equipment was very poor, which made communication between units very difficult.

Also on the *Largs* were General Oliver Lesse, Group Captain [Evans?] and Rear-Admiral R R McGrigor – all perhaps available as advisors, particularly in the early stages during the landings.

HMS Largs was positioned off Siracuse and we could see Mount Etna quite clearly.

The allied invasion of Sicily



The invasion of Sicily, code-named Operation Husky, began before dawn on July 10, 1943, with combined air and sea landings involving 150,000 troops, 3,000 ships and 4,000 aircraft, all directed at the southern shores of the island.

By the afternoon of July 10, supported by shattering naval and aerial bombardments of enemy positions, 150,000 Allied troops reached the Sicilian shores, bringing along 600 tanks.

For the next five weeks, Patton's army moved toward the north-western shore of Sicily, then east toward Messina, protecting the flank of Montgomery's veteran forces as they moved up the east coast of the island. Meanwhile, jarred by the Allied invasion, the Italian fascist regime fell rapidly into disrepute, as the Allies had hoped. On July 24, 1943, Prime Minister Benito Mussolini (1883-1945) was deposed and arrested.



HMS Largs



Senior officers from all three services addressing personnel on the deck of HMS Largs

After about a week or so, the fighting moved inland and the ship departed for Malta. We anchored in St Paul's Bay for a few days until there was a berth for the ship in Valetta Harbour.

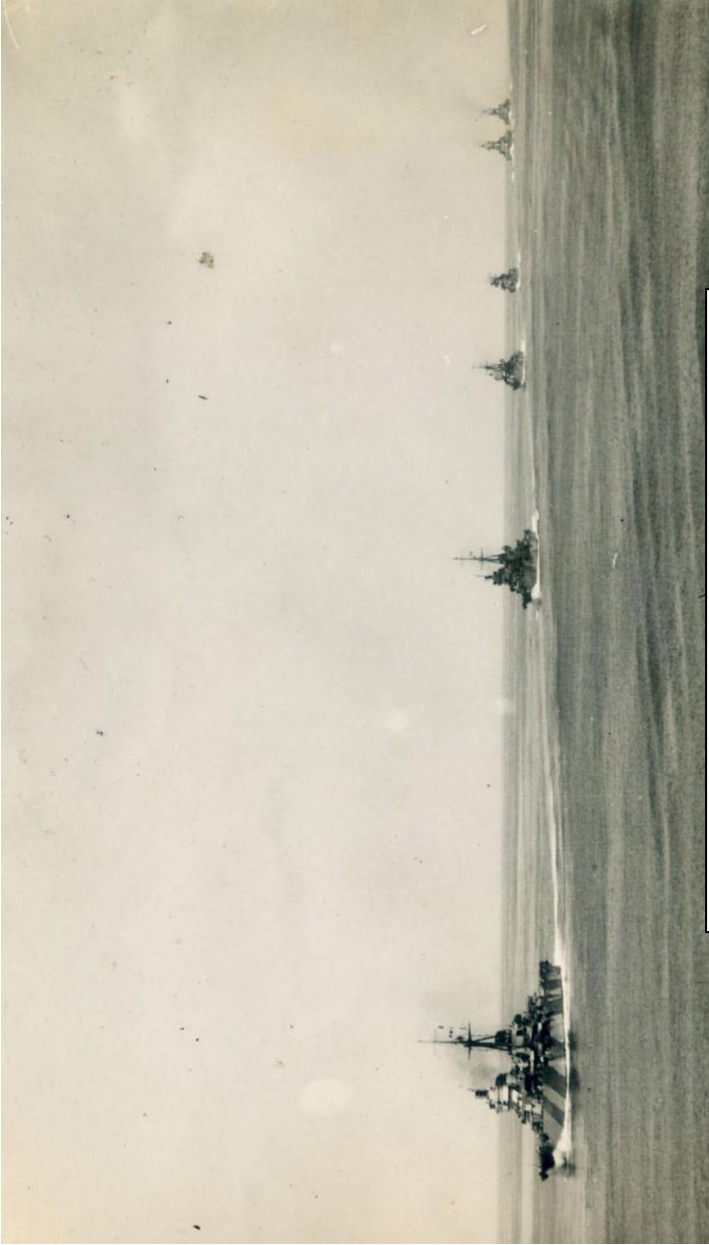
During the next four weeks we were able to see the terrible damage inflicted on Malta by the constant air raids which had taken place over the previous two years. Apart from a few 'hit and run' raids, it was now fairly quiet. Food and supplies were at last reaching the island

At the end of August, twelve of us were told to pack a 'Steaming bag' (a small travelling bag that just held a few essentials), and the following morning we were driven to the airstrip. Together with an officer, we climbed into a Dakota which had no seats – so we sat on the floor!

We were flown to Tunis, and from there taken by lorry to the docks in Algiers. We were then surprised to find ourselves boarding an American ship, the USS *Ancon*, and even more pleased to find we would be sleeping in bunks instead of having to sling our hammocks at night. Our officer went off to report to the ship's captain. On his return, he informed us that the captain considered there were too many "special parties" on board, and they should all be reduced by fifty percent. Being one of the youngest in our party, I (with five others) was put ashore, and taken to a small village outside Algiers call El Achour. The RAF had set up a radio station there in a large building.

Then, on 4th September, we heard that the Italians had decided to sign an armistice and had ceased fighting. A few days later, arrangements were made for the Italian fleet to sail out from their base at Sorrento and surrender to the Royal Navy.

At the end of September, we were taken to the docks, and a launch took us to HMS *King George V* – or, as we called her 'The KG5' – which was about to return to the UK. We settled into the ship's routine as we sailed north; then one morning it became cooler, and the order was given for everyone to change into their 'number threes' – the normal navy blue uniform. When we were spotted still wearing our 'khaki' shorts and shirts we were told in no uncertain terms to go to the "slops" (the ship's clothing stores) and get fitted out with the appropriate blues. We were quite glad of them later as the ship sailed around the top of Scotland to Rosyth in the Firth of Forth on 18th October.

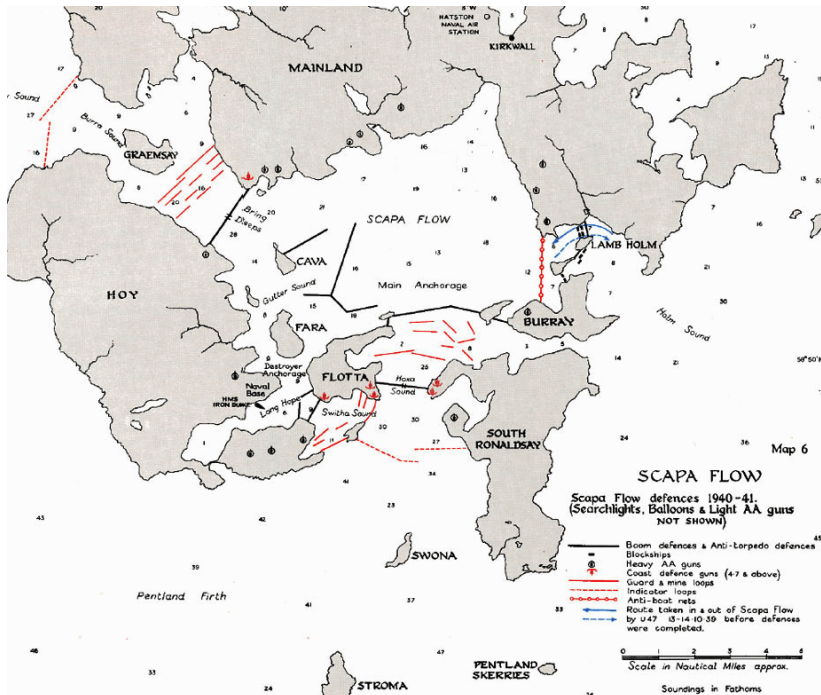


The Italian Fleet surrenders

Within a short time we were drafted back to Cheadle, where we were surprised to find Americans had moved into post at Woodhead Hall! It took several months more for our kitbags to arrive.

Scapa Flow and the Arctic Convoys

I remained in Cheadle until Spring 1944 when I, and others, were posted to the Orkneys – Scapa Flow. Our base was on the island of Hoy, and we lived in Nissen huts at a place known as 'Balloon Camp'. We overlooked the harbour and could see ships at anchor, or sailing in or out.



Scapa Flow

Scapa Flow, a body of water sheltered by various islands of the Orkney Islands in Scotland, was the main British naval base when World War II began in 1939.

The defensive structures were inadequate, and as a result, German submarine U-47 was able to penetrate into Scapa Flow to sink *HMS Royal Oak* on 14 Oct 1939, and Ju 88 bombers damaged *HMS Iron Duke* on 17 Oct 1939. New block ships, barriers, mines, anti-aircraft, and anti-ship guns were hurriedly constructed to remedy the shortcomings.

For the remainder of the war, Scapa Flow remained a very busy naval base, serving as a staging point for Arctic Convoys to northern Russia, for example.

It took days to get there by train, and there wasn't much to do when you got there, other than wait to see which ship you would be posted to.

At the end of April a dozen of us, with our HRO Wireless sets, were put aboard the battleship *HMS Duke of York*, and by 1st April 1944 we had crossed the Arctic Circle.

Apparently, the ship had sailed to cover Russian Convoy JW58 which consisted of 49 ships, as there was a possibility of the *Tirpitz* coming out of Norway to attack the convoy. On 3rd April, the Fleet Air Arm launched 'Operation Tungsten' against the *Tirpitz*, and managed to inflict enough damage to delay her sailing for a while. So the *Duke of York* returned to Scapa Flow on 5th April and we disembarked to Balloon Camp.

HRO Wireless Sets

I should mention that as Y service personnel, we carried our own special radio sets onto each ship. These were suitcase sized, and were not for the 'day to day' signal interception that you see in the films, it was much more specialised.

Usually, we only ever saw the Radio Room and the Mess. Certainly, I never clapped eyes on the Admiral!

We were not part of a ship's 'regular' crew, and our 'rota' might differ from theirs; but we would Mess with them and, where possible, carry out routine jobs with them. But where the 'regular' crew would stay with the same ship, we remained at our base until required.

The signals/messages we picked up were in code, but they would usually be groups of 3 or 5 letters or numbers. On the ships, we listened for a daily broadcast from RAF Cheadle which sent out 'nonsense' messages with coded messages in among them. These would tell us which frequencies to use to listen for German planes. Enemy planes were sent out each day – 2 or 3 from Norway – to send weather reports to the German bases. If the planes spotted the convoys they would report those too – but with training and experience, we could tell when this happened because the 'sound' of the signals would be different to the standard weather reports



Proclamation

All Seamen, Wherever Ye May Be,

Greetings : Know All Ye by these Presents that ALEC R MC'REEDY did on APRIL 1st 1944 appear in the Northernmost Reaches of my Realm, embarked in H.M.S. DUKE of YORK : in latitude 66° 33' N. and in longitude 1° 31' E bound for the Dark and Frosty Wastes of

➤ The Land of the Midnight Sun ➤ and did with My Royal Permission, enter this Dread Region by crossing

by virtue whereof, I, Neptunus Rex, Ruler of the Raging Main, do hereby declare him to be a loyal and trusty **Blue-nose** and do call upon all Icebergs, Polar Bears, Whales, Narwhals, Sealions and other Creatures of the Frigid North, to show him due deference and respect. Disobey under pain of My Royal Displeasure.

Commanding Officer.



Neptunus Rex
Ruler of the Raging Main.
Aurora Borealis
Queen of His Majesty's
Northern Provinces.

Bruce J. J. J. J.
C. C. H. H. H.

A week or so later we were off again, this time on the cruiser HMS *Diadem*. Rear Admiral RR McGrigor was also on board. We did not take any merchant ships with us as convoys were discontinued during the summer months – the supply line was switched to the Persian Gulf during that period. However, our convoy included the escort carriers *Activity* and *Fencer*, plus 16 destroyers. It is possible the Germans were not expecting any more activity through the Arctic at that time of year. Fortunately, we had an uneventful journey and reached the Kola Inlet on 23rd April 1944. The reason for our voyage was to escort a number of empty merchant ships back to the UK in time to help with the supply chain needed for D-Day (not that we knew when D-Day would be!)

We started back on 28th April 1944, escorting convoy RA59 of 45 ships. I remember there was just one merchant ship torpedoed, and because the ship was empty she sank very slowly. I have since read that she was the *USS William S Thayer*.

I was also aware of distant explosions during the voyage. Apparently, the swordfish aircraft depth-charged and sank U277, U674 and U959. But of course, during the war you were only told what you needed to know. So I have gleaned this information more recently from books.

I can also remember being on a ship and watching aircraft taking off from aircraft carriers to attack the *Tirpitz*. I believe this could have been the last Fleet Air Arm attempt to sink the German battleship. It was 'Operation Goodwood', which took place over 3 or 4 days from 20th August 1944. I think our party may have been on HMS *Berwick*, a county class cruiser.

I often wish that I had kept a brief diary of events, but diaries were not permitted.



HMS *Diadem*

My next Russian Convoy was JW63 of 36 merchant ships. We were on the escort carrier *HMS Vindex*, and due to bad weather we reached the Kola Inlet without being observed.



HMS Vindex

We left the Kola Inlet for the homeward trip with 30 merchant ships, on 11th January 1945. Again, the weather was extremely bad and eventually the convoy was having difficulty keeping together, so the Admiral ordered the merchantmen to sail into Torshavn to reform. The captain of the *Vindex* told us over the tannoy that he was going to turn the ship into the storm, and the ship leaned to port... then leaned some more... and leaned a bit further. I thought we were going to capsize but eventually, with a lot of creaking and groaning, the ship gradually righted herself, and eventually made her way back to Scapa Flow.

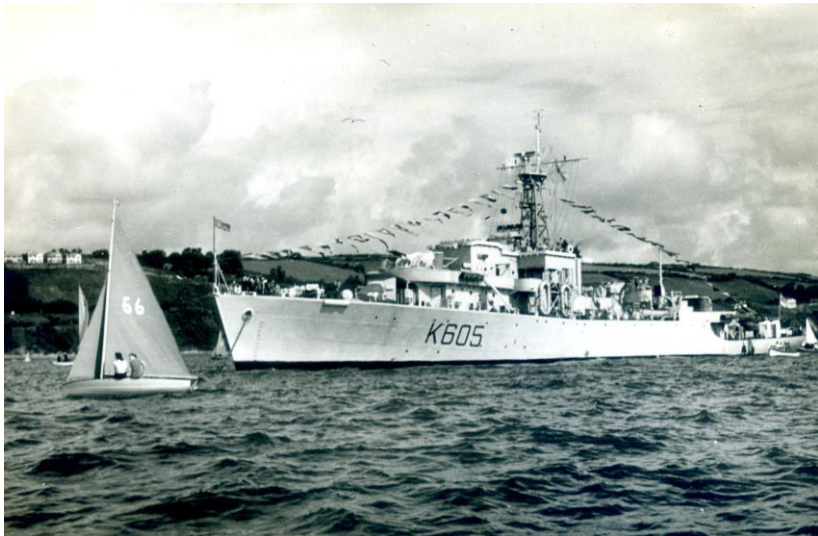
So we returned without any losses, but badly battered by the gales.

A few months later, I was posted back to Cheadle, and I remember being on the evening shift on VE Day. The technicians fixed coloured lights on some of the aerial pylons!

Of course, the war in the Far East was still going on, so within a few months, I returned to Devonport Barracks and began to learn Japanese morse. In late September, I was posted to HMS *Tremadoc Bay*, which had just been completed in Belfast. On 11th October she was officially commissioned and accepted from the shipyard.

We sailed to Portland, where various trials were carried out – including gunnery! Because there were no longer any radio signals to intercept in British waters, I was given a clipboard and told to note the information needed about the guns as they fired.

Then it was back to Devonport where, as the Japanese war had ended, I returned to barracks.



HMS Tremadoc Bay anchored off Looe in 1949

Just before Christmas 1945, I was posted to HMS *Landrail*, an airfield which had been used by the Fleet Air Arm but was then virtually unused. Situated on the end of the Kintyre peninsula at Machrihanish, the only town nearby was Campbelltown. No sooner had I got there, after a two-day train journey, than my name came out of the hat for Christmas leave – so I travelled all the way home to Cornwall!

I was rarely able to tell my family that I would be home on leave, as there was no telephone at home. Sometimes it was possible to write a few lines, if I was stationed on shore and knew I had leave due; and once I was able to telephone to the shop where my sister worked, to let her know I was on my way

Keeping in touch

Very few people had telephones, so the only way to keep in touch with family and friends was to write letters. It was possible to send telegrams, but as this was the way the War Office notified families about personnel who were Missing in Action or Killed in Action, the sight of a telegraph boy walking up the path wasn't always welcome.

Letters to families could only be sent when in port, of course; while theirs had to be addressed via shore facilities and could take weeks to catch up with the addressee – if they arrived at all. Letters were opened and read by officers and censors, to make sure that no important or secret information was being sent. Naval personnel, for example, couldn't tell their families exactly where they were, or (sometimes) what they had been doing.

But usually, when I was fortunate enough to get back to Looe, I just turned up on the doorstep, and that was what happened at Christmas 1945. Then it was back to Machrihanish, to spend the last few months of my naval career at an almost disused airfield which is now a well-known golf course.

In April 1946 I returned to Devonport, and on 6th May 1946 I was given a civilian suit – complete with hat – and discharged from the Royal Navy with eight weeks' leave.

During those eight weeks, I looked around to see what jobs were available. There was plenty of work needed doing, but no materials to do it. Everything required a permit, food was still rationed (and would continue to be rationed for several years after the war).

I kept in touch with some of my ex-naval colleagues at that time, and one day I received a letter which informed me that the Air Ministry was recruiting ex-servicemen to continue Y work at Cheadle. I decided to apply and was accepted.

So I became a civilian radio 'officer' and worked for the Air Ministry until 1962, when the Government decided that all the services should amalgamate within GCHQ Cheltenham. On 19th August 1963, I was sent on a training course from Cheadle to *Bletchley Park*. I was told it was an ex-Post Office building and had no idea at that time that this had been Station X, to which all our wartime intercepts had been sent.

It was not until about 1980 that Bletchley's wartime role began to be known.

I retired in 1984!

