

Jack Cranston recounts his experiences with the ARP, Home Guard, Royal Navy, Arctic and Atlantic Convoys, MTBs, D-Day landings, the Burma Campaign and going on a tiger shoot in Rajasthan



I was 15 when the Second World war broke out so I joined the ARP and was a Messenger, although in fact I did all the things that ARP Wardens would be asked to do. As soon as I became old enough I joined the Home Guard, and I remember my old Sergeant Charlie Kay teaching me about firing STEN guns and throwing grenades. Grenades had a ten second fuse which was activated by pulling out the pin; 'remember to count to five after you've pulled the pin out before throwing it, otherwise they can throw it back'.

I didn't wait to be called up when I was 18, in 1942, and volunteered for the Royal Navy. I didn't have any sea faring experience and there wasn't a naval tradition in the family but I thought it would be better than waiting to be called up when then wouldn't have a choice and might end up being posted to the army, or possibly as a Bevan Boy working in the pits. I had thought about joining the Merchant Navy until my mother pointed out at least one Merchant vessel was being lost each week. I did 10 weeks basic training as an Ordinary Seaman before going on for Officer training at Roedean in Sussex; Roedean was a girls public school so after the war I enjoyed answering 'Roedean', when asked where I had gone to school.



After training I was posted to HMS Jamaica and spent 18 months or so on convoy escort duties, variously on Atlantic and Arctic routes. It was I remember, bitterly cold, and we were in action and did suffer damage and casualties; one fellow deck officer was killed by an exploding shell only about ten yards from me. It was not nice, but the convoys were bringing vital supplies, and convoy escort was

essential. We were also involved in keeping the German heavy ships bottled up in the Baltic

When I joined the navy I found most of the people in charge were very young and sometimes not very knowledgeable. It was better to listen to Petty officers who had experience). I also wanted to work in smaller ships rather than the Light Cruiser sort of thing, and after about 18 months I transferred to Motor Torpedo Boats. From the start of 1944 it had been clear that there would be an invasion and we were on constant patrol amid very tight security; there was a period when we were encouraged to leak misinformation, and that was quite successful.

Before D-Day itself I remember that the churches were packed all the time, mainly with troops, especially Americans. Sometimes you could hardly get in. I remember that people would play the organ from time to time.

During D-Day itself I was deployed in a Rescue launch, going right up to the beaches. Our job was to recover soldiers who had perhaps been disembarked from landing craft too early when ramps had been

lowered in deep water; soldiers were weighed down by ammunition etc and they would just sink. We recovered and saved hundreds that day and ferried injured to hospital ships which were offshore beyond the range of the guns. I remember clearly passing one landing craft with American soldiers aboard, all singing the Battle Hymn of the Republic.

After D-Day I volunteered for Combined Operations and was allocated to Naval Party 1031. We sailed from Liverpool to Colombo in Ceylon as it was then, arriving six weeks later, before going into training immediately with landing craft.

We were to be deployed in landings in the *Chiangs*, which are very like Scottish sea lochs, as the army tried to drive the Japanese out of the country. The terrain was very difficult with jungle coming right



down to the water's edge. I remember in particular working with the Royal Marine Commandos landing on Akyab Island; I was effectively fighting alongside them, wearing jungle camouflage and a slouch hat in face to face combat with Japanese forces. I remember one occasion when a private soldier started to kick a dead Japanese soldier's head, only to be shouted at by the Sergeant Major to stop; 'We do NOT do that!' he yelled, 'We are the British Army!'

I remember also at this time encountering POWs and civilian slave labourers whose guards had fled; they were clad in rags and were filthy. One woman threw herself at me in relief at being freed; she was crawling with lice and skeletally thin. I remember talking about it after the war with my cousin who was older than me and who was a Medical Officer. He had been one of the first into Belsen after its liberation.

I contracted Dengue Fever at this time and was hospitalised for some three weeks in Chittagong. I did rejoin my unit but I have to admit to trying to delay that; I wasn't at all pleased to be going back.

I remember VJ Day and my Captain saying, 'I don't trust the Japanese. We'll keep at action stations for a while.' After that I went to Bombay to be demobbed. I only realized much later in life that my family back home had not heard from me for over three months. So far as they were concerned I was in South East Asia Command and that was all they knew. My mother had written to me every week but I had not received any letters because of where I was. When I eventually made it to Bombay there was a whole sack of mail for me; my mother had sent me copies of the newspaper with each letter. I realised much later how difficult it must have been for my parents.

Being in Bombay at that time meant that that we got invitations to all sorts of parties and events. We got one to visit the Himalayan Officers Club, so we went there. Another time we travelled to visit the Maharaja of Rajastan to go on a tiger shoot. Although we went out on elephants I'm glad we never saw any tigers. And I spent my 21st Birthday in Madras.

When I came back I went to see my old Sergeant Charlie Kay again at the Labour Exchange. That was the first time I met Marion, who became my wife.