

Kenneth R Sargent

No matter how long you live (I am now 82) you never, ever forget your Service Number. Mine 1421281. As a boy I was always intrigued by aircraft and on one occasion I was taken down to see the Schneider Trophy race which was won by England at over 300 mph. Regrettably, at the age of 10 I was diagnosed as having short sight, which ruled out my chance to fly. I have worn glasses all of my life. Because of this, when old enough, I volunteered to join the R.A.F. as motorboat crew on 8/10/41. Prior to this date I joined the Local Defence Volunteers (commonly known as "look, duck and vanish", later changed to the Home Guard. In those early days it is doubtful how much resistance we could have put up, when on alternative nights my father and I shared the single shot .22 rifle. However long before, supplies of American .300 Springfield rifles all packed in grease from W.W.1. were being issued, and we were being trained by Army Sergeant Majors in the use of these and hand grenades and other light weapons.

During this time the Dunkirk evacuation was in progress and troops were streaming back from France to ports along the south coast including Falmouth, Cornwall where I lived. How well I remember the despair on their faces. They thought they had failed. We plied them with food, tea and beer as they were packed aboard trains to other destinations. After this period we were more vigilant guarding the beaches. More than once I could have sworn I heard boats grinding on the sandy beaches in the dead of night, but fortunately we never used our trusty Springfields in anger.

Having done quite a lot of dinghy sailing as a boy I decided to join the R.A.F. Marine Craft Section. After kitting out we were sent to Scarborough on the east coast for "square-bashing" for six weeks. It was there I had Corporal Johnny Lockwood (later the comedian who starred in many theatre productions) as our instructor whose favourite trick while marching through the streets was his call to "left wheel, then right wheel, and finally free wheel with the arms horizontal back and front". Don't know what the local population thought of our antics but it was a bit of light relief to us in those conditions.

A worst time of my life I can't remember with ice on the roads for the whole of our stay and a freezing cold billet. Fire picket duty was a pleasure in the local hotel! Then a welcome change being posted to Calshot for training as motorboat crew. On completion my friend was sent to Dover, while I got posted to Stornaway in the Hebrides. I was the luckier one as his boat got shot up by a German fighter and he lost the sight in one eye. We would patrol off the Butt of Lewis in case any of the American planes (Lightnings and B19's) being ferried over, experienced trouble and had to ditch. It was quite a sight to see about 6 Lightnings escorted by a B19 making their way to Scotland, and gave us a ray of hope that the tide was on the turn. While some had to abort before they got into our area we never had to do a pick-up. The sea and wild weather up there took a toll on those unfortunates to suffer sea-sickness. It has never been a problem for me. The patrols were long and boring until they started using us as target for aircraft using radar and Leigh lights who were practicing anti-submarine attacks. It made quite a diversion to

suddenly be lit up by one of those searchlights from out of the blue. They were remarkably effective and accounted for many U-boats.

After several months I was sent to do a 2nd class coxswains course and following its successful completion and a promotion to Corporal I was posted to Northern Ireland where we worked with the Americans who were training on Marauders and Bostons. My radio call sign was Seagull 79 and we were treated right royally by the Yanks who piled our plates high with food. They must have thought we looked half-starved. During this time I struck up a friendship with one of them and got him to take me up in a Vultee Vengeance dive bomber where, over the mountains of Mourne, he proceeded to put it through its paces. On landing he wanted to know if I had blacked out during the exercise and could he put me down for some flying pay. I said no to both. In return we took some of them out on the launch but they weren't so lucky and got seasick. They were remarkably easy to get along with and generous to a fault. Again, no crash landings or ditchings!

After several months with them and having put on about a stone in weight, I was sent to Wales to pick up a brand new rescue launch. These were 63 ft long and had 3 Napier Sealion engines of 500 hp with a top speed of nearly 40 knots. After fitting out we proceeded around the coast to Dover. All was go here and coincided with the tragic Dieppe raid. Although called out several times we were unable to find any dinghies or aircrew apart from wreckage. We did have a near-miss from two American bombers who jettisoned their bombs before landing back in England. Fifty yards off the port bow was too close for comfort!!

I then got a posting to Greenock to do a D.E.M.S. course learning about 20 mm Oerlikon cannons and Bofors anti-aircraft guns. I began to think something was in store for us because we only had Browning 303 machine guns on our 63 footers. I wasn't mistaken, for some while after I was sent to Portsmouth to join a 112 ft Fairmile ex Naval torpedo boat destined for the Japanese theatre which was armed with the above named cannons. By this time the European war had finished and I spent V.E. Day in London with my father's family.

These Fairmiles had been taken over by the R.A.F. and fitted out as rescue boats and had four 1350 hp Packard motors, 6000 gallons of high octane fuel and cruised at nearly 30 knots. Floating bombs we called them!! We left Portsmouth running two engines at a time and finally dropped anchor in Gibraltar after 4 days at sea. From there on to Malta where we anchored in Valetta Harbour. At this time my brother Geoff landed in Malta after 3 years in Burma with Wingates Chindits en route to England for some much deserved leave. Unfortunately we never got to meet up in Malta as neither of us knew where the other one was. We never got to the Pacific for which I was quite thankful. We were then kept in the Med to cover the many aircraft flying troops home until I was finally demobbed 15th August 1946.

I then spent 6 months restoring a yacht I had bought, finally sold it at a good profit and got married to my old teenage sweetheart who had served as a

W.A.A.F. armourer during the war. Neither of us could see a great future in Britain and having met a lady from Perth, decided to migrate to Australia.

We landed at Fremantle after a six-week voyage in the old "Dorsetshire". Apart from visits to other states I have spent most of my time in W.A., where in spite of a few set-backs I have enjoyed a great life. Regrettably, after 19 years our marriage failed. In spite of two hip replacements and two eye implants, I still go for 9 holes of golf at least once a week. I am lucky to have lived in this day and age which has seen so many medical breakthroughs. From horse-drawn drays in London as a boy, to jet aircraft. This reminds me to mention one of our crew came back off leave during the war saying he had seen aircraft flying around with no propellers. He was laughed at!!

I have been so lucky to have survived when so many of my old school chums didn't make it back. I can only hope and pray we shall never see such a waste of lives in the future.