

## Remembrance Sunday Service at Inkpen

10 November 2019

### Captain RED Ryder, VC, RN

We are very lucky to be able to count Bob Ryder, a Second World War national hero, as a former resident of Inkpen. Soon after he and his wife Hilaré arrived in Inkpen in 1977, they became firm friends of my parents. My father, who also served in the Royal Navy during Second World War, was delighted to get to know this famous naval officer. Although I was only a teenager at the time, he was always very easy to talk to and good fun, reflecting his skill at being interested in all generations. My sister and I spent a week sailing with Bob and Hilaré where our fondness for both of them increased even further.

A number of you may remember Bob as he was a frequent church attender and was much liked by those who knew him (especially for his somewhat mischievous sense of humour). There is a tree in the churchyard planted in memory of Hilaré who tragically predeceased him by four years. The Ryder family gave the shelves for the library at the back of the church and his funeral was held here.

Before the start of the Second World War, Bob had established his credentials as an excellent naval officer with varied experience including serving as a midshipman on a battleship and as a lieutenant in a submarine and captaining a ketch on a 16,000 mile voyage from Hong Kong to Dartmouth and also captaining a schooner on a three year expedition to Antarctica.

At the start of the War, Bob was specifically selected to command a Q-ship. As you may know, these vessels were merchant ships with concealed guns which offered themselves as targets to U-boats with the object of luring them to destruction, a tactic that had been successfully deployed during the First World War. Bob was assigned *HMS Willamette Valley* and embarked on a deadly game of bluff, requiring patience, cool nerve and unflinching courage. After four months of hunting U-boats with limited contact, *Willamette Valley* was hit during the evening in June 1940 by the first of three torpedoes some 300 miles SW of Ireland in the Atlantic. Bob implemented the drill of ordering away the "panic party" (a group who put to sea in life-boats to give the impression of abandoning ship so that the U-boat might surface to take prisoners and thereby present a target). But, some 45 minutes later, a second torpedo struck the engine room and set the ship ablaze. As the men tried to save the ship, a third torpedo struck and she sank within a couple of minutes. The officers and men tried to save the ship with raw courage and unwavering discipline that Bob had engendered until she sank with only 26 survivors out of the ship's complement of 90. Bob, having been thrown into the water as the ship sank, managed to find some floating debris in the dark and, covered in oil, managed to survive alone at sea for almost four days without food or water until finally rescued by a convoy. This was a man with supreme leadership skill, resilience and infectious bravery which was noted by the Navy's Higher Command. A number of the survivors volunteered to (and did) serve again under Bob subsequently.

In the Spring of 1942, Britain was in a very precarious position – although the Battle of Britain had given a temporary reprieve, Crete (the last foothold in Europe) had been lost, Singapore had fallen, Rommel was advancing in Africa and the Russians were falling back. The German battleship *Tirpitz* was in Norwegian waters and there was a threat that if she broke through to the Atlantic, she would

devastate convoys. However, the *Tirpitz* was only likely to undertake such a move if she could use the only port in that area that could accommodate her size, being St. Nazaire on the River Loire in Brittany. It was decided that the dock at St. Nazaire should be destroyed and Bob was selected as the Naval Commander of the raid. The plan involved a joint Naval / Commando operation in which an obsolete destroyer, *HMS Campbelltown*, packed with explosive would be rammed into the lock gates and detonated by delayed timer so as to destroy the dock. The Commandos, ferried by *HMS Campbelltown* and in light (but precariously vulnerable) motor-launches manned by the naval contingent, would destroy a number of targets which were crucial to the operation of the dock and then withdraw back to the motor launches which would retire at speed to the Atlantic. As you would expect, the Loire was heavily defended but there were shallow waters at the mouth of the river which were not effectively covered by fire and the planners calculated that a raiding force could use this advantage to gain access a substantial distance up river.

Whilst the Commandos were a well-oiled machine, Bob had just one month in which to assemble the naval contingent, train and then execute the plan. In his words "No staff – no office – no car, not even a telephone and no ships; everything including the collection of the force and its training had to be achieved in less than four weeks". This was a hard deadline so as to take advantage of the high tides to cross the shallow waters.

At 2pm on 26 March 1942, the raiding force escorted by two destroyers set out from Falmouth under Bob's command – 611 officers and men in total. After some encounters with a u-boat and a foreign merchant convoy, the force entered the mouth of the Loire. The meticulous planning paid off including successfully responding to challenges by Morse code in German whilst the flotilla was floodlit by searchlights, but at last luck ran out with only a mile to go and the full fury of the German defenders was unleashed on the flotilla. The darkness was banished by the ensuing fire fight and many of the unprotected motor launches were destroyed or badly damaged. However, the *Campbeltown* struck the exact spot only 4 minutes after the target time. The Commandos disembarked from the *Campbeltown* and from those motor launches which had not been destroyed or which were able to approach the designated landing points. The night was lit up by tracer, search lights and guns blazing from all sides. Bob, having led the assault from the lead boat of the force, was also the last to leave with a boat full of dead and wounded. His boat somehow survived the gauntlet of fire from all quarters whilst speeding back down river.

In the early part of the following day, the *Campbeltown* exploded and destroyed the dock. The mission had been a success in that the dock was not available for the rest of the war. However, success came at a price - of the 611 Commandos and naval personnel, 169 were killed (some 28%) and 200 were taken prisoner. There were 60% casualties.

The daring raid was described by Churchill as a "brilliant and heroic exploit". Bob's role was widely recognised by the media and he became an instant hero but he hated the limelight, much preferring the company of his family. His was no ordinary bravery – his courage was contagious and spurred others to extraordinary acts and subsequently inspired the nation. He was awarded the Victoria Cross and Lord Mountbatten's letter to him needs no further embellishment to summarise the supreme acts of this exceptional man:

"I have never had more pleasure in writing to congratulate anybody than in writing to you for your grandly earned Victoria Cross. Alas, so few of the VCs of this war have been given to living people

and it is essential for the younger officers and men coming along to have a few heroes to look up to who are still in the land of the living. I consider your VC will have achieved a double purpose: firstly, it is the greatest compliment that could be paid to the whole of your force; secondly, it will centre round it all the enthusiasm for the fighting spirit which is only awaiting an outlet in this country."