



Royal Navy Lt Derric A Breen RNVR

Derric was born in December 1919 and grew up in Chopwell in the Derwent Valley with two brothers and a sister. His father had died a month before Derric was born and his mother worked hard to provide for the family. Derric was at the City of Leeds Training College when he heard war had been declared, but was initially undecided as to what course of action to take, as his political convictions led him towards an abhorrence of war:

I grew up as a pacifist; as a socialist; wearing the white poppy of peace instead of the bloody red reminder of Flanders' fields. . . Like all young people, I thought I could change the world, in my case, by writing very left wing articles in the College magazine. . . The only conclusion I reached was that I could not fight, not a matter of would not but a matter of could not.



Derric Breen May 1940

Once war had been declared, Derric's College was evacuated to Scarborough and he stayed at College until he went for a service medical in Leeds in May 1940:

A bright old boy in a blue serge suit, a suit resplendent with brass buttons, told me that the Navy was with its back to the wall and that it needed telegraphists. He was convincing, at least he convinced me. I came out from the interview with my decision made. . . The Army might have kept me waiting but the Navy worked on a more urgent timescale and before the week was out, I had my orders to report to HMS Royal Arthur at Skegness. .

The powers that be put me in class W102, which was a Telegraphist training class. It was a high pressure training situation for the intention was to push the usual RN training course of 18 months into just over twenty weeks, in addition to giving us a thorough training as an infantry battalion and a role in coastal defence. . . During the day we sweated at morse and Fleet signalling in the lecture rooms and in the evening went down to the beaches to guard against invasion.



Class W102 at HMS Royal Arthur, Skegness,
Derric sixth from left, back row

With training complete, Derric went to the Signals School at Portsmouth in November before being drafted to HMS Egret at Rosyth the following month:

It was high water and she lay alongside, shining in her coat of North Atlantic grey: I saw her as a thing of beauty, neat, compact and to me so big.

Derric's introduction to the morse aboard *Egret* came as a shock:

this came at me through a maze of static, distorted but also more choppy and disjointed than any morse I had ever heard. It took me only a few minutes to realise my limitations as a wireless operator: I also, in the same brief period, developed a determination to make the grade; to be of use as soon as was possible.



HMS Egret sailed down the East Coast at the head of a convoy and Derric went to look at the Thames Estuary as *Egret* steamed in toward Sheerness:

I've never forgotten that sight, it was appalling; wherever I looked, I could see the skeletons of dead ships; masts, stems, sterns and, here and there, a lonely bridge protruded from the water. It was like walking through a graveyard, through a graveyard in which a careless sexton had neglected to see that the dead were properly buried. This, then, was the war at sea, the war the Press insisted we were winning. . . We plied the East Coast convoy route for some two months in which period I became a decent sparker, played soccer for the ship; and began once more to do a little boxing at which, I found, I was surprisingly good. . . I found the process of becoming a sailor, as distinct from a telegraphist, a complex one. First of all, I had to become a competent working telegraphist and coder while at the same time, I had to come to terms with life in that tightly knit and sometimes suffocating community which is found in a ship at war.



Ordinary Telegraphist Derric A
Breen, Skegness June 1940

Although the work side was the major element of day-to-day life, Derric still found time to play pranks on his shipmates:

A favourite was to emerge from the Office and sit quietly on the mess deck, ignoring questions, being absorbed in inflating and putting on one's life-belt. . . It took a bit of inflating and this task we did with bitterly sour faces, while the more nervous of our shipmates watched the procedure with increasing concern, convinced that the fighting tops of both *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau* had hove into sight. It was a game which could only be played at rare intervals and to a carefully selected audience, but I've seen a lot of people go white at the time.

By now, the situation facing convoys crossing the Atlantic was becoming desperate; and *Egret* was called on to strengthen the Escort Groups heading out from Londonderry. As the convoy entered the Pentland Firth, Derric witnessed his first storm at sea:

Out of this welter of breaking waves we would stagger to a crest; from this peak we could most often see the whole of the convoy. There were, however, times when we staggered to the crest, only to find that the entire brood we were protecting had themselves disappeared into a trough. Again and again, *Egret* buried her bow into an unheralded monster and she staggered to a standstill in a chaos of breaking furniture and straining gear. We were in waters which had been known to rip the turret from the deck of a battleship; our 1250 ton cockleshell was in a fight for survival.

Having seen out the storm, *Egret* sailed into the Atlantic at the end of February 1941:

We went out to find ourselves in a nightmare which did not end with waking and the dawn. Indeed we sailed into a nightmare without end. We found a world in which



ships about us went up in flames; in which the sea was covered in the burning fuel of tankers; in which ships carrying explosives simply disappeared. Worse than all these, struggling to provide some kind of screen for those ships ploughing stubbornly on, we could not stop for our dead and our dying, the living in the boats and in the water, were beyond our aid. Britain's survival depended upon our pushing each convoy through, no matter the cost. . . Even then, the struggling escort forces sank six submarines: to our joy, these included the three great Aces: Gunther von Prien, Schepke and Kretchmer; each of these were reported to have sunk 200,000 tons of shipping. There may have been some who mourned their loss, we did not.

To complete our joys *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau* were loose and having missed us by passing hull down over the horizon had gone on to sink 27 ships in the convoys behind us.

The storms took their toll on both men and ship:

Cups, saucers and plates went in the first days and as a way to eat we resorted to the Nestle's milk tin. . . What however was the real agony, was the never ending, muscle crippling, effort to hang on to something, to find a corner in which to wedge, so that for the odd minute the strain might come off legs and arms.

As the U-boat attacks intensified, Derric now worked in a two watch shift-pattern:

We grew more and more weary, the struggle to keep awake becoming increasingly unbearable. The W/T office was a small haven of warmth and freedom from the water which seemed to be everywhere in the ship. . . To keep awake, we smoked non-stop, one after another.

Storm damage meant that *Egret* had to return to Liverpool for repairs, then a quick return to the Atlantic:

Our last trip was to escort an "OB" convoy on its way from UK to America, taking it to some 40 degrees west, where we picked up the inward bound "HX" convoy bound for Loch Ewe and Liverpool. Throughout the trip, we collected messages telling us that the *Bismarck* and probably the *Prinz Eugen* were at sea, with the likely intention of breaking out through the Denmark Strait. . . For us this was the clap of doom, we were escorting a 4.5 knot convoy and should the Germans break free, there would be butchery among the lightly escorted convoys, spread out like honey for bees, along the thousand miles of ocean. We told our convoy the good news and set about working them up to the highest speed of which they were capable. We worked them up to six knots and there was some hope that the break-out forces would pass to the west of us. Dawn found me on watch, reporting to the bridge, that we had the first enemy reports from the *Hood* and *Prince of Wales* and the news that a major action was imminent. For a while there was signal quiet and all seemed to stand still. At last the key chattered again, it was *Norfolk*, with a brief signal, "*Hood* sunk in position...proceed to search for survivors". It was in addressed to the destroyers puffing up from behind and was in fleet code - I did not need a signal book to decode it. Nevertheless, so great was



the import of the message that I checked it against the code before sending it up to the bridge. Immediately the voice-pipe whistled - it was the Navigator, demanding I check the signal. I did so for the third time, but that didn't alter anything. She was gone. It took time, however, for the full import of the signal to be digested. Then the engines kicked up and over and, like a sheepdog, we set to work herding and chivvying our convoy, scraping another half-knot out of them while we rode shotgun.. The convoy routes were in a shambles as escorts girded their loins to make some kind of an effort to give our convoys the chance to run. In the last analysis, we might be able to do no more than to lay a smoke screen to cover them before going down to the heavy guns. Meanwhile we ran for it. Some convoys turned back to avoid the danger area, but those like us with our heads in the trap could do no more than whip 'em up and keep running. Through the 25th and 26th we ran for it, learning the shadowing cruisers had lost touch. We searched the horizon with eyes sharpened with dread.

The 27th brought the news that *Bismarck* was down and that *Eugen* had made a home run. We staggered on - both we and the ship were very near the limits of endurance.

Egret returned safely to the UK for a six week re-fit and then joined a new Escort Group, the 44th, on escort duties to the Gambia:

An ocean convoy was a sight to behold. To economise on escorts, bigger convoys were now being sailed at 10 day intervals. Imagine 70-80 ships in a dozen columns, each column spaced 1000 metres from the next and each ship in the column spaced 500 metres from the one ahead. It was an awe-inspiring sight, impressive and martial, but displaying its own vulnerability as the mass of ships showing a seven to eight mile front steamed along at 4 to 5 knots, extending backward for 3 to 4 miles. Round this 30+ square miles of vulnerable shipping our six escorts tried to keep a wall against attack.



HMS Egret 'my white bird'

The convoy was open to attack by air, U-boat or surface raiders. On *Egret's* return journey three FW 200s appeared:

Tommo and I had a rifle apiece and a pocket full of 0.303. We let go at the head-on targets and our firing was lost in the staccato blasts of 0.5s, strip Lewis guns and whatever else we could muster. . . The haze cleared and I looked around me, a merchant ship was belching smoke and falling out of line. We went in and took off six terribly wounded men, caught when the big cannon swept their decks. . . From the Foyle to the Gambia and back again, we ploughed on through the early bitter winter of 1941, with the sea and the war taking its steady toll upon us. I spoke with men, only to be told that a few days later they were in sick bay, then to learn that there was another flag-wrapped bundle to go over the side. To us, Tuberculosis was a swift and deadly killer, a killer which struck silently and quickly and spared not.



The 44th Escort Group carried out a series of successful runs, yet:

Feelings were running high between the escort groups where those who sank submarines, were given media adulation and showered with decorations despite their losses. The great U-boat killer was Captain Walker of the 36th Escort Group. It was a situation which required the Admiralty to carry out a delicate balancing act. Given twenty Walkers our losses would be such that we would lose the war; given twenty escort groups like the 44th and the U-boats would continue to gather in strength. As I say, it required a balancing act, and many escort groups felt that this was not being done. There was acrimony and a lot of bitter feeling between the various escort groups.

Having survived another journey, when *Egret's* engines broke down midway, Derric was drafted to *HMS Victory* and then to *King Alfred* as a prospective Officer Cadet. On leaving the ship, Derric was handed a small attaché case filled with white tropical chocolate, bacon, eggs and tinned fruit. He would later lose many of his good friends from *Egret* when she was sunk in August 1943. The Officer Cadet training began at Mowden Girls' School at Hove, then on to Lancing College:



View of a liner off Liverpool after another successful run from Africa

Oddly enough, it was a little while before I realised that our numbers were being gradually whittled down. Make a mistake and Bang! a Tilly back to the depot and a quick return to the big war. We played at plotting a ship using a wheeled platform upon which a pelorus was mounted. Around the oddly shaped field were set out symbols to signify lighthouses, buoys and headlands. Using the compass and plotting table we steered our "Chariot" through the maze of nautical hazards. This, to me, was fun. The top 25% were allowed to go to either destroyers or Coastal Forces. I had set my heart on small boats, where with luck, there would be a chance of a command of my own.

Having passed his examinations, Derric set out for the Royal Naval College at Greenwich:

I walked up the steps into the Painted Hall and stood in open-mouthed awe. The Hall was quite beautiful: the painted walls and painted ceiling, the long rows of rich wooden tables, the silver Nelson Column candlesticks on the tables and the array of shining silver. It was an introduction to a more generous way of life, a more gracious way of life, a way of life which was to bring me much joy. . . We went off to Whale Island, His Britannic Majesty's Gunnery School, *HMS Excellent*. Time on Whaley was spent between the parade and the weapons teachers.

The last stage of the training was undertaken at Fort William. Derric caught the overnight train from Euston which stopped at the tiny station of Rannoch Moor:



The platform was covered in trestle tables upon which rested pots of tea. Well, not really pots of tea. We drank out of half jam-jars which had been cut in two, by the time honoured method of half-filling with oil and then applying a hot wire round the circumference. Not very elegant, yet serving the purpose. In the bitter November day, we drank it there on the platform, freezing hands wrapped round the "mug" and overcoat buttoned tight under icy chin. How grateful we were to the Scots women who had turned out on the bitter day to help us on our way.

Derric learned to handle the Fairmile 'B' as well as Higgins and Elco MTBs before his posting to *HDML 1157* on the Isle of Bute. On arrival, he found that no CO had yet been appointed and there were no signs of a crew.

The New Year brought my new CO, Sub-Lieutenant Basil Knight, avuncular in appearance, clear of skin, rather short, the epitome of the pre-war city business gent, a man to be remembered. . . We began the never-ending task of working up, slowly at first, meeting and dealing with the endless problems endemic in getting a small ship ready for war. In such a small ship, multi-role training was essential. Gunners must be able to start and run the engines and motor-mechanics at a pinch must be able to man a gun and fight it out. The telegraphist, like the rest, must be able to man a gun and steer a course. The Cox'n at least must be able to use a chart and lay off a course for home. There was no guarantee that Basil or I might always be in a state to do this.

The crew began a series of anti-submarine exercises before heading for Newport. Here Derric learned that *HDML 1157* was destined for Algiers but he would not be on it. Instead, he had been appointed to *RML 516* attached to the 61st Rescue Flotilla as No 1 to Lt Tony Bone RNVR:

ML 1157 never reached Algiers - the *City of Melbourne* in which she was embarked was sunk in the Bay of Biscay by a FW200.

We were always busy at Portland: young men like these, were not prepared to restrict themselves to Air Sea Rescue; there had to be another facet to their work; it had to be something which was more like their idea of Coastal Forces. These additional tasks, usually consisted of defensive patrols, outside the shipping routes and between the merchant ships and incoming enemy light forces.

The crew adopted a similar role after returning to Newhaven:

It was a ghostly game of tag in which our intention was to give cover to the ships which used the dark to make the risky passage through the narrows of the Straits of Dover. . . One of the nicer things about *516* was that she was adopted by the chorus of Ivor Novello's show 'The Dancing Years', which was currently running at the Adelphi. . . one member of the crew, in strict rotation, was in London for two weeks, a guest of the girls, who wine and dined him and looked after his creature comforts.

The main role of the crew was in Air Sea Rescue, and one particular rescue is recalled vividly in Derric's memoir:



That night, we were briefed, that the following morning would see a Fortress attack on a major German industrial target (Stuttgart). . . We motored quietly out past the Seven Sisters and took up station well off Beachy Head. . . It was not a good day for the USAAF, for what came back from Stuttgart was a series of gaggles of Forts, not in any formation but each struggling to get home. . . Then we saw, what must be ours, a Fort flying at about fifty feet, too low to clear the Sisters. A high altitude Spitfire wallowing like a drunken sailor was hanging on his tail and willing him on. . . She came in low and I heard Tony telling him the bearing on which to ditch. . . About 200 yards on our port bow, she struck and began to settle. . . A quick count of heads, unless they were carrying extra bodies, everyone was out. . . I went over the side, it was summer but Oh! that first shock of cold water coming in through my clothes. . . At last they were all in. All that is, save one. He had drifted helplessly downwind. We tried passing a rope to him but no joy, he was far past that state. I went back into the water. . . I grated up and down against the hull, no longer feeling the bumps or the cuts, just the cold and the all consuming weariness. At last we had him on the deck, I gave him a shot of Omnopon and helped him clear his screaming ears.



RML 516 at the Builder's Yard

Derric's next move was to the Coastal Forces Commanding Officer's course at Ardrishaig and at the end of the course he was appointed to command *HDML 1388*. It was then that the news arrived that Tony Bone and his friend Jock had been killed, another blow. It was Derric's first official command:

Consequently I flitted between elation and apprehension. . . The crew were very green, so unhappily was No 1. My job then, was to teach them. I recalled Basil Knight and Tony Bone and how they had taught me. . . As soon as was possible, we sailed North on our way to Ardrishaig for our working up period, prior to going abroad.

After dark, in the Tees Bay, disaster struck as *1388* became hard aground on Heugh Point at the foot of the steep cliffs. Having abandoned the launch, Derric was further distressed to discover the Fleet Auxiliary Vessel's Signals Recode book was missing. He swam out to the boat to recover it from the wireless office. At the Court of Enquiry Derric was found not to be at fault for the loss. His next command was of *HDML 1391* and he was then drafted to *HMS Pict* in Freetown as First Lieutenant:

Pict was a mess, water contaminated, crew's quarters and bedding filthy beyond belief, no awnings and all gear and running equipment in need of repair. That, however, was only part of the problem. There had been a time when the Freetown Escort Force had



been a first class operational unit. Now we, a handful of Arctic trawlers, a whaler or two and some very old and down at heel corvettes, were the front line force.

When the ex-whaler *HMS Southern Pride* was wrecked on Hooper's Patch, Derric commanded the seaboat taking off survivors:

I lost the wind in my left ear - no stars, no moon, *Pict* lost far behind in the dark and no sign of the wreck. The making tide was sweeping us far into the bay - ahead the surf roared as it pounded the reef. The a second of wavering light. We had found her; now for the fun!

She was a strange and daunting sight as she sat four square on the Patch, sitting like a ship at sea, yet as each sea surged past she did not lift to the swell. They swept over and along her.. with this wild sea there was a good chance we would end up washed onto her deck - a hard burst of rowing - we hit with a shattering thump and the animal whine of a broken plank..

In the dark bodies came over the side - three, four, five - then on the crest of a surge we were gone and over the Patch and helpless in that churning sea. We flogged hard at the oars to get her under control - three staggering swirls, then the power of four big strong men on those 14' oars brought her around.. but how long would *Pride* last and how would she go. I didn't see her lasting until morning and orders or no orders, we would be going back to the Patch. The surf was getting up and next time it wouldn't be so easy.

With a (mostly) fresh crew, Derric took the seaboat out again.

In the ghastly light of the starshell, we gulped and went in stern-first, stemming hard as the seas swept along *Pride's* upper deck. The survivors were coming over the side into the water, little groups of desperate men, two or three at a time..

We worked like slaves, dragging bodies, unrecognisable as men, coughing, wheezing things, covered in fuel oil - limp and exhausted men - yet with a joke and a word for the sweating, gasping men in the boat. . . I took my weary carcass below, into what only a few hours before had been rather a well kept wardroom. No longer, it was full of men, men still reeking of fuel oil and coughing up that burning fluid. I joined the gang and set to with pounds of butter to clear ears, noses and the delicate membranes of the eye.

In July 1944 he was involved in another rescue of passengers and crew from the Dutch ship *DS Bodegraven*. This small liner was sunk by *U547* (Niemeyer) when a long way off its known route, and finding the survivors proved difficult:

The second afternoon of the search saw us well to the westward - dawn next day would see us just about on the furthest possible position. So much for our skill, because to the north and west of us the sea drift was two knots in the direction of land and there - because *Bodegraven* had unbeknown to us cut the corner - were the survivors coming through their second day of purgatory.



Up on the wing of the bridge I was physically comfortable, but deep inside me something felt wrong. At first, only a grumble and a nag. As the afternoon wore on, however, my faith in our calculations remorselessly ebbed away. The inner message was simple: "North", it said. It seemed madness. A madness which should not be allowed to throw away the lives of those enduring on the boats and rafts, but by now it was beyond ignoring and I whistled down the voicepipe to the CO in his cabin. His response was immediate, so he too was lying awake mulling over the problem: "Yes, we could make a limited foray to the North if I wanted to investigate a possible sighting - but be back on the basic search line before dark"

We ran out steadily, getting further and further from our so-carefully planned search line.. Damn it, give it another fifteen minutes, then the hell with it; hunch or pain - I was giving no more. The glasses swung, routinely and without hope or expectation. The fifteen minutes passed then, in what was really a gesture of finality and farewell, I kept on looking as I coned her round. As we turned, she rolled a little and lifted to a gentle swell. There! Knifed above the horizon, clear and black in that crystal clear air - seen for but a moment but no doubts - it was the peak of the triangular sail of a ship's boat. Against the odds we had found them.

The survivors helped with work duties aboard *Pict*.

I came up the hatch from the wardroom to be greeted not by my normal single line of men off watch, but by two lines. There, lined up on the port side were the male survivors. Forward came the senior Dutch rating, who saluted and reported most formally: "Dutch Marine, reporting for duty, Sir". They had obviously spent some time smartening themselves up and looked pretty good for a group of men who had climbed over the side the previous day wrapped in flags or bits of bunting. There are times when one's pride in man takes away the ability to express feelings in words. I looked at the Dutchman and paid him the highest compliment I could. I drew myself up to attention, returned his salute and instructed him to carry on, saying they were now crew and would go on the tot strength for rum.



HMS Pict off breakwater in Plymouth, after return from Freetown

On arrival at Freetown, the *Bodegraven* survivors threw a party in gratitude for their rescue. Then:

The struggles over, I got down to the job of being a First Lieutenant and the Herculean task of making *Pict* clean, shipshape and into a fighting unit which would give us a chance of surviving the war. The task of a First Lieutenant is basically a very simple one. He is required to present to the Captain a ship and crew both in all ways equipped



and ready to fight, a simple prescript which calls for endless work, lots of tact and on a number of occasions sheer robbery.

After a short spell of ill-health and admittance to the 51st General Hospital, Derric set about getting the Ship's Company fit with early morning runs and football. At the same time the process was started of building up a West African Navy. The heat and humidity took their toll on health:

We all suffered from peripheral malaria, stomach upsets, sweat rashes and of course, dhobi itch.

At last came the end of the war:

All over the Northern Hemisphere, submarines in droves had hoisted the black flag and surfaced to surrender; but here there were no U-Boats and even the end of the war passed us by. I have often since, watched the throngs celebrating in London. It wasn't like that for us; we were drained and exhausted; perhaps even too far gone to be able, then, to realise that at last it was over.

Derric returned home at the end of July 1945 and his memoir reflects the difficulties faced by so many, in coming to terms with the changed circumstances:

I came home in 1945 to what seemed to me to be an alien world in which my lost friends, wrecked marriage and weary mind were of little consequence. For a long time I found study impossible and concentrated on picking up the strands of teaching again and enjoying the physical and social pleasures of Rugby football. I also rejoined the R.N.V.R. in which I was to serve until retirement. All these started me on the road to recovery but eventually researching and writing the book together with help from my wife Joan and son Andrew completed the job.



Lt Derric A Breen RNVR

In 1970 I gave up teaching and after a year at Newcastle University joined the North Regional Examinations Board as R&D Officer. There I spent twelve very happy years before eventually retiring in 1982.

In 1992 I had my left leg amputated and have since had to come to terms with the consequent loss of mobility. My old friends, who survived the war are still in close contact. Now all in our eighties we are restricted to corresponding by telephone. We are still close.