



## Royal Navy Tel (S) George Smith

George was born in March 1925, the only son in a poverty-stricken family from London's East End and he left school at 14 to work in an office. In mid 1940, as George was returning home with his sister and friends, the sirens started and he watched the ensuing raid from his friend's house. Guns were firing from the parks at the aircraft:

The bravest sight I remember was a few Spitfires flying up from different directions right into the middle of those planes. You could hear the machine guns going and then the bombs fell. The Docks were the target. After that the raids on London were almost nightly, but we, like many others, stayed put. Our road was hit seven times and whole families were lost. The LDV was formed and people between the ages of 16-60 were asked to volunteer, many did. I was 15 at that time. They had uniforms and weapons, although they were WW1 rifles to start with. Young people grew up very quickly, although we still went dancing and cycled to the pictures when we could. I joined the 9<sup>th</sup> Battalion City of London. We had weekend camps at Brookwood and Bisley Ranges in Surrey and Sunday marches in full kit with a band, mainly to keep up morale.

One incident still haunts me. Our home was a tenement house in Middleton Road. Above us lived a family with a 14 year old daughter Sheila. One night in 1941 they went to the Middleton Arms to go into the cellar during a raid. My sister, mother and I stayed under a heavy table in our basement flat. There was an horrific sound of a bomb coming down directly above. The house almost took off after the explosion and we thought we were hit. I ran outside to see what had happened and the Middleton Arms pub was cut in half. Our fears were for the people upstairs. When my father returned home from fire-watching he went to the hospital to find casualties laying on the floor, and the more serious ones being operated on. My father picked up Sheila and carried her home to us. Sheila's father had been killed and her mother died from wounds shortly after. My father was unable to tell Sheila the news so I had to do it. So there was a 16 year old boy telling a 14 year old girl that she was now an orphan overnight, I shared her grief.

I did a spell of work in the building trade, making bomb-blasted houses habitable. Then I was a temporary Civil Servant for a few months in Hackney Town Hall Rates Office. After that I worked in munitions for a Free French company off the Tottenham Court Road.

I joined the Royal Navy in 1943 at the age of 18, after being a member of the Home Guard for 2½ years. So as a fully trained Infantryman, or boy, I really knew nothing



George while in the Home Guard aged 17



During naval service, aged 20.



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of my final choice as a sailor, or the ways of the sea or Service. During the initial training, I was given the choice of becoming a Sick Booth Attendant, Steward, Cook or Telegraphist. I chose the latter. After grading, I was selected as a Special Telegraphist, separate from the General Service Telegraphists. A group of us was sent to Brighton, with Eastbourne to follow, in civvy billets, to take the courses, which lasted approximately eight months in all. After passing the exams involved, I was sent back to Chatham Barracks to await draft, not knowing, of course, where that would be to. It was quite a shock after the comparative comfort of civvy billets to sleep in a hammock, in a cold and sombre environment. Before long, all Signals Branch was transferred to a camp in Cookham Wood, Rochester, which was somewhat better than the main barracks. It was here that I received the North Russian draft. A number of Navy personnel, varied ranks, comprised the Russian draft, bound for the waiting convoy laying off the Orkney Isles. Five Special Telegraphists, of whom I was one, were to stay in Russia, north of Murmansk in the inner Arctic Circle, in a Wireless Telegraphy shore station. We travelled to Thurso, North Scotland, by train where we boarded a Merchant Navy ship for a three hour trip to the Orkneys. Ron, my friend, and I, both 19, managed this trip without seasickness. There were three destroyer escorts for the convoy, *Cassandra*, *Caprice* and *Cambrian* and Ron and I boarded the *Cassandra* for the voyage. It was late evening and the destroyers looked like ghost ships in the mist.

From 30 November 1944, I started seven days of Hell! My particular work at sea was the detection and location of U-boats. On shore, it was telegraphic communications in a more orthodox way, but at sea it was just one Telegraphist in a small W/T cabin whose vigilance was the measure of early warning received by the ship's Captain. He could give the ship a fighting chance against the lurking U-boat, or pack, that normally followed out from Norway to attack the convoys. Having an extra two operators on board, over and above the normal crew requirements meant that one of us was allocated all day and one all night, to assist the operators on watch during the voyage.

Ron and I both survived the first hour or so without feeling ill, but then we really hit the heavy seas of the North Atlantic ocean in the winter time. The seasickness started with a vengeance. In the ensuing three hours or so, we suffered this horror until exhaustion set in and I ended up asleep on the mess deck, by a small electric fire in the bulkhead. Ron was in a similar state. I awoke and felt a little better and through the ship's intercom was coming the song 'Bless this House' by Gracie Fields. The pair of us lived on toast for about the first three days until we could take normal meals. It was getting darker, colder, and the seas were mountainous and relentless. We passed Iceland and then we started picking up W/T signals from U-boats. Action took place too frequently for comfort.

It was chaotic on board, as far as living in the mess decks. There was hardly an opportunity to sling your hammock because all the hooks were being used day and night. A lad named Tommy Sayers, a signaller in the ship's crew, would see to it that I had a place to sleep on the deck under the mess deck table, near his own area, when we couldn't sling our hammocks.

We had been kitted out with Arctic clothing, heavy sea boots and white woollen stockings, duffel coats and fur hats and also woollen underwear which, incidentally, was too itchy to wear. On 7 December 1944, we arrived at Polyarnyy, north of Murmansk in the evening. The ship was covered in ice and pickaxes had to be used to loosen it. There was even ice inside on the bulkheads. Until then I had never seen a foreign land. I saw Russian naval personnel,



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soldiers and a few peasants walking about and also, packs of wild dogs, lovely creatures, some very large.

We said our goodbyes to our mates on board the *Cassandra* and the next morning five of us were put ashore. We were left sitting on our kitbags on the icy quayside for three hours before Russian officials appeared to inspect our baggage. The transport came in the form of an Army lorry with great chains round the wheels to prevent it skidding on the ice. Inside was a reception group, looking like Russians by their clothes but the joke was on us, as they were our own guys from the shore station. Ron and I were taken to a converted wooden house, or 'Russki Dom!' about a mile and a half outside of Polyarnyy, in the Arctic wilderness. Polyarnyy consisted of a number of wooden shacks or buildings. The landscape was wild, hilly and very white, with practically no vegetation to be seen. There were about a dozen ratings living in the station. One room was set out with radio equipment and occupied by three operators on watch at any given time, one room was our living room, and one was a dormitory, set out with camp beds and lockers. Also, there was a galley with a very large kitchen range and a large vat in the corner for fresh water which had to be kept filled from a pump in a nearby 'Russki Dom'. Each man obtained two bucketsful a day to keep it supplied. The place was kept bearably warm by two small electric fires and the kitchen range, in which we burned wood. This was all the fuel available. Two peasants chopped it outside for us in exchange for a few tins of beans. We settled down to work in four watches so there was 24 hour coverage. Our time off was occupied with chores, cooking and a little relaxation in the form of being silly b...s on skis. There was only about two hours of daylight each day, so we virtually lived in perpetual twilight. The local Commissar had ordered there to be no fraternising with the British, but we had two Russian sailors who visited us now and again. They sang, played the mandolin and showed us their Russian dances. We gave them rum and cigarettes. One of the sailors was the equivalent of a Petty Officer and the other a rating. Christmas came and we tried to make some decorations for our shack. We invited the two Russian sailors over and tried to maintain the Christmas spirit.

Around two days after our convoy departed, it was attacked by U-boats at 6am and the *Cassandra* was torpedoed. The ship was cut in half. The bow section broke off and sank in the icy water. Our mess deck was in that section. The stern section was towed back to Russia with survivors on board. Many were in a very bad way and were taken to hospital in Varanger, across the inlet from Polyarnyy. Sixty three on board the *Cassandra* were lost and among them, to the best of my knowledge, was Tommy Sayers. News was very limited, but I was devastated by this news and even now, after all these years, I sometimes see them as they were in uniform, smiling and joking, and sometimes a little frightened of the awful situation life had put them in.

The New Year was upon us and we received a message from a Russian Naval Group that they wanted us to attend their New Year's Party. Five of us went, were welcomed by our hosts and given short red drinks. We took some Navy rum with us for them to sample. There were a few young women there. This was quite a treat for us. Everyone conversed as best they could and the atmosphere was friendly. I played records some of the time on an old wind-up gramophone, ballet music mainly. Before we left, I had to persuade one of our number not to follow a Russian woman sailor into the bedroom. She was someone's wife, he had had enough to drink and I did not want there to be any trouble.



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About once a week the Russians put on an American film in their Red Fleet Club for our benefit, if we wished to attend. The Red Fleet Club was about the largest building in Polyarnyy. The film was shown in a large cold hall. We sat there in our heavy clothing, while in a room next door a Russian brass band would invariably be practising. The film usually broke down a couple of times during the performance. The journey to and from the Club was made on foot, about a mile and a half across the plain, on solid ice, with the Northern Lights for company. On one occasion a Russian peasant gave us a lift on his horse-drawn sledge.

In January we were instructed to start dismantling our radio station and pack up all the gear. The station had been used by the Royal Navy for about a year. We were to be billeted in the English Hospital, used by survivors from stricken Convoy ships. I was the last person to leave the shack, carrying my gear and trudging off across the icy plain. As we left I saw Kate standing in the centre of a group of Russian Officers in front of the station and waving goodbye to us. The Officers were all standing, seemingly to attention. Kate was our Russian 'home-help'. She was plump, about mid-thirties and very affable. She could speak a little English, made us coffee or soup and tidied up the place.

We arrived at our quarters in Varanger and were billeted in an empty ward. It was there we met up with some survivors from the *Cassandra*. A day or two after our arrival, a number of British merchant seamen came to the hospital for a check up having, it seemed, indulged themselves with women from Archangel on their journeys. They were billeted in our ward, were very colourfully dressed, and reminded me of pirates. They were great tough characters, plenty of jokes and good company. One of them tried to convince us about a dance going on some distance away across the plain. Five of us decided to set out to find it. We dressed in our heavy gear, fur hats, duffel coats, thick white stockings and sea boots, over our uniforms. After trudging some distance over the barren landscape we could hear music. We finally arrived at a frozen lake, on which a number of men and women were skating to the music. As we stood there, a uniformed Russian paused from his skating and said "Hi-ya, Bud", the only two English words he knew. He pointed to a building of generous size, and on passing through the large doorway we found ourselves in a well-lit room. Many people of all ranks were there, both sexes. As we stood there, silence descended on the large group. We must have looked like aliens from outer space to them. Slowly, and with caution, they crowded round and tried to communicate. They were all smartly dressed, mainly uniformed.

I managed to carry on a little ragged conversation with a lovely girl who had long dark hair and was accompanied by two officers. We then wandered around and found another room which was fitted out as a theatre with rows of seats. We were allowed in and we sat down about five rows from the front in the middle of the row. The theatre began to fill and I had a rather portly Russian lady sitting next to me. It seemed that a slight argument developed in the gangway and it appeared that we may have taken someone's seats. However we were left in peace and the show began. It was a ballet show, but what it was all about we obviously didn't know, so we clapped, laughed and looked intense with the rest. I think it was an amateur dramatics performance as the make-up wasn't too good and after an hour or so we returned to the foyer. We went into the dance and I danced with my long haired attractive young lady to the strains of an unknown waltz, wearing seaboots. We were also given cigarettes, hand rolled and containing poor quality tobacco. Our 'tailor-made' ones were eagerly taken in return. The atmosphere was warm and friendly. When the time came to return to the hospital it was indicated that we should allow a small boy to take us back via a short cut. The Russians waved goodbye and the boy took us through a narrow, sloping lane. We were all sliding like hell and



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hanging on to each other for dear life. We finally took off over a big drop into soft snow and a group of Russian soldiers rolled about laughing at our predicament. We knew then that this had been a practical joke at our expense.

During the last few days in Russia, Ron and I went on board a small Merchant Navy boat at the invitation of our mates in the hospital. This was an experience. The mess deck was a room with a wood burning stove in the middle, a cat and a dog and the crew sitting around drinking cocoa and smoking. It was a home from home, and a friendlier and more motley collection of humanity you couldn't hope to meet.

About the end of January we boarded *HMS Vindex*, a small aircraft carrier, for the voyage home. Five of us were given the task of taking care of eight survivors from the *Cassandra*. We five were able to use our hammocks for sleeping in the recreation room but our injured mates had old deck-level camp beds to sleep in. Through the nature of their injuries it was also necessary to feed some of them and we had to tie their beds to posts in order to stop them sliding about during the horrendous journey home.

After arriving back in England I joined *HMS Hotspur* at Barrow in Furness. Soon after her trials were completed we went out on escort duties with 14th Escort Group. On one trip from Gibraltar through the Bay of Biscay we lost a man overboard, but due to the U-boat threat we were ordered to keep speed with the convoy. When we arrived back in Portsmouth we held an auction of his belongings and raised £20. After VE Day we headed to Norway and were allowed ashore at Trondheim. I saw Prince Olaf in a large black car and he waved when he spotted our British uniforms. I was then sent on a course in Wimbledon to study Japanese morse. Early in 1946 I received a draft to go to Ceylon and left on board the aircraft carrier *HMS Fencer*. During the trip I suffered an attack of the mumps, my temperature soared, and for the last four days of the journey I spent my time down in the sick-bay with an 'infectious' sign on the door.

On arrival I had ten days in an 'Infectious Diseases' hospital in solitary confinement and then travelled to Trincomalee where the naval camp was in palm leaf huts with no doors. Baboons would waltz through the trees and the camp. I also had a leave near Kandy, 600 feet up. It was cool and very pleasant. On my return I went down with bronchitis and pleurisy and had a spell in Colombo hospital, 54<sup>th</sup> Indian General.

My demob came up and I returned home on *HMS Indomitable*. In October 1946 I returned to civilian life and for the next 42 years I worked in engineering. I married and raised a family of four, three girls and one boy. Two daughters live in Australia.



George before a Remembrance Day commemoration.



## Western Approaches

Having given an account of my first draft in the Royal Navy as a Special Telegraphist, to North Russia via a Russian Convoy, and my stay in the Arctic north of Murmansk near the coast and the Barents Sea, my work there was recording via W/T the Enigma Code, transmitted by the Germans. At the end of my account I mentioned the Western Approaches briefly and Ceylon. I would like to give a more comprehensive account of the Western Approaches.



*HMS Hotspur*

Within a short time after my return from Russia, including seven days leave (I must mention here that on arriving home at Middleton Road, Dalston E8 my mother looked for a moment as if I had appeared as a ghost because, I think, she never expected to see me again after a Russian Convoy in which so many ships and men were lost.) I was drafted to the Western Approaches to become a member of the crew on *HMS Hotspur*, a destroyer, in my own capacity as a Telegraphist Special Branch. There were three of us in three watches, ie we worked alone in a cabin amid ship on the upper deck, incidentally by a large gun, which was dangerous if your heavy door was not secured and the gun was fired. The blast was the problem.

To return to the time when we left Chatham barracks to board the *Hotspur*, a complete new crew travelled to Barrow in Furness where the ship was being repaired after action at sea. We travelled by steam train, of course, it was January 1945. We all settled in the various mess decks and claimed the various hooks on the bulkheads for our hammocks. The repairs were still being finished at the same time. In a day or two we set off for the Clyde in Scotland to give the Destroyer trials before going out to sea. This was a somewhat tedious business, at one time I was up in the 'crows nest' calling out numbers to the officers below for 4 hours.

Eventually the ship was fit for sea, in the meantime our nearest destination for a few hours shore leave, was Edinburgh, across the Firth of Forth Bridge, where we went dancing at the Mecca and stayed the night at the YMCA. Time of return to the ship was 7.30am. We put out to sea!

As a matter of note, the ladies in Tottenham knitted woollies for the crew of their adopted ship, *HMS Hotspur*.

The *Hotspur's* base was Liverpool Docks. The period at sea was, as it turned out, until just after the end of the German War. Our sea time took us several times through the Bay of Biscay to Gibraltar, half way to America, up to the North Atlantic, the English Channel and around Scotland etc. all three of us telegraphists worked alone, as I have mentioned before, so I would like to give you an idea of this particular job, 4 hours at a time on watch. In the cabin were two wireless (radio) sets, one receiver and one transmitter, two phones – one to broadcast and one to the Bridge (ie the Captain), and of course headphones etc.



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We were listening and taking down Morse Code from broadcasts. The special work was to identify U boats (German submarines) from the short message they transmitted on sighting a target vessel or convoy, to their base in Norway. The U Boat signal was recognised by their special Morse call sign. The message was very short and quick, but just enough to get a bearing on them by a special compass installed in the cabin. I would immediately phone the Captain on the Bridge and tell him the approximate position of the enemy U Boat (he would be completely ignorant of the danger) and then we would contact the senior vessel, by code, to compare the bearings my opposite number had taken, and a third from the other ship. (The three destroyers were *Hotspur*, *Hesperus* and *Havoc*. The ships would then circle the given location and drop depth charges in the hope of hitting the U Boat, sometimes successful and sometimes not. The force of these explosions sometimes almost lifted the stern of the vessel out of the water.

On one apparent hit at a submarine, oil came up and some debris. A terrific cheer went up from those on deck but I was taken aback by this. I knew there were men down there, like us in many ways, and we were killing them. Nevertheless, if the situation was reversed, if they could, they would kill us.

Time went on and it was a self catering system on board, the members of each mess deck prepared their own food and the cook cooked it. We always exceeded our mess bill. I was twenty years old and in line for a daily tot of rum, a Navy tradition. It was issued before midday and after that you could eat anything! Navy rum was strong.

Apart from hunting the U Boats we also had escort duties, escorting large ships from Gibraltar to the UK, the three destroyers in line, diagonally in front of the large ship, guarding it from enemy submarines. We escorted the *Luc Pasteur* (French presumably) and at another time the battleship *HMS Renown*. It was on this trip that a man was lost from the *Hotspur*. The *Hotspur* was an old ship, built in approximately 1936, and at the time I was doing my work on board the *Hesperas* going back to Portsmouth. The *Renown* being the senior vessel was forcing the pace at 26 knots. On board the *Hesperas* someone said to me on deck, "Look at your ship, George!" it was really in trouble trying to maintain the speed, dipping and rolling badly.

The next thing we heard was that a man who had served in the Royal Navy for 15 years had gone overboard. A message was flashed back to *Renown* for permission to go back after the sailor and find him if possible. Permission refused, we were told to keep pace and carry on. So rather than risk a sudden attack, a man was sacrificed off the *Hotspur*. Who knows what a terrible shock and the feelings of despair that man must have suffered when he saw the ships disappear into the distance leaving him to die a terrible death in a vast ocean.

The *Hotspur* arrived in Portsmouth for a day or two, and the lost man's belongings were auctioned to raise some money to give to his next of kin. The pathetic items were bought by the crew – 10/- for a vest, for example, and then they were discarded. Twenty pounds was raised but there was no known next of kin so the money was given to a woman friend of his in Portsmouth.

We went to sea again to continue the hunt. By this time, in 1945, we were the hunters and the U boats were the hunted. On one more trip to Gibraltar, I and some others managed to go ashore for a few hours and, lo and behold, we all bought bananas on stalks to send back home



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when we reached the UK again. The destroyer was like a banana boat – the British had not seen bananas for a long time.

The German war was drawing to a close. When we arrived at our base, the Liverpool Docks, we managed shore leave which meant travelling on the overhead railway to the town. We used two dance halls, the Mecca and the Grafton Rooms, and many happy hours were spent there. Sleep was catered for, for a few hours, at a rather doubtful place in Lime Street for 1/- (a shilling). It was necessary to sleep with anything of value under your pillow, even your shoes!

On our last trip to Gibraltar, on escort duties, we were near home when I received a message in 'plain language' (which was unusual) 'SPICE THE MAINBRACE'. On enquiring to a Telegraphist Petty Officer on board, I was told this meant a double tot of rum. It was Winston Churchill's way of letting us know the war was over.

Just before we arrived off the Welsh coast, the captain decided to get rid of the odd depth charge, so there was an announcement on the loudspeaker, "Hands to fishing stations" because when this happened, many large fish were expected to come to the surface, stunned or dead. Many rushed to the side of the destroyer but only a small tiddler floated by.

We passed a floating mine, not far from the ship. We shot at it with rifles to try and explode it, but we had no luck.

We anchored some distance from Liverpool and we could hear all the celebrations going on ashore over the radio. We mistakenly thought we would be able to go ashore but no, two days later we were on our way to Norway, up the fjord to Trondheim. All along the banks and on the hills were Norwegians, waving and cheering when they spotted the Union Jack on the three destroyers. We docked at Trondheim, the *Hotspur* was last to dock.

I was with a companion on my walk through the main part of the town and I called into a hat shop and chose a rather attractive ladies hat which I thought would please a special girlfriend in London, named Gwen, when I got home. The lady assistant stared straight through me when serving my purchase until she suddenly realised we were not German sailors, by our uniforms, and then she could not do enough for us.

We walked into a bar with half swing doors – like something out of the Wild West! We tried half a pint of beer which was poor quality. A man came over to us and said in good English, "I am delighted to meet you. Please can I have one of your cigarettes? Thank you. I have not spoken English since before the war as it was too dangerous. I will come with you around the town and show you some things." He was pleasant company, and among other things he showed us where the Germans had shot people that did not please them for whatever reason. We said goodbye to our friend, and stood by a wall having a smoke. On casting half a cigarette down, three men dived for it. A large open car came by and people started waving



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and cheering. The man in the car waved at us. On enquiring who he was, we were told he was Prince Olaf, he had returned from England.

Before we returned to the ship, two SS officers in full regalia stood and stared at us. They were fully armed and we were not. We just stared back and they abruptly turned and strode off. We continued on our way. There were many released prisoners of whatever nationality roaming the streets in sort of green dungarees. They fled from us in panic, thinking we were German sailors! We finally left for Liverpool after about two days.

On arriving at Liverpool, I and others were destined to go to Chatham barracks, having left the *Hotspur*. On our way through the docks, I witnessed U Boats, very rusty, with German sailors on the decks under some sort of guard.

I was given 18 days 'in from sea' leave to go home to my family in London's East End, and to see my girlfriend, Gwen, who lived in Tottenham.

On returning to Chatham I was put on a course of Japanese Morse at Wimbledon in a Shell Mex property, used by the Navy. Eventually I was sent out to Ceylon, but after the Japanese war ended, so my WT services were no longer needed.