



Royal Navy Able Seaman William Smith DSM

At the outbreak of war, Bill Smith was 19 years old and he volunteered for the Royal Navy. During the winter of 1939-40 he began training at Skegness and after six weeks transferred to HM Naval Barracks, Portsmouth for additional training, before joining a ship sailing to Scapa Flow.

Then began two and a half years' service in the Mediterranean. Afterwards, Bill had two weeks' leave and then went to Dunoon for a six week course in ASDIC - submarine detection. He came out with a top grade and was posted to a new anti-submarine sloop, *HMS Magpie*, in Southampton which was equipped with all the latest anti-U Boat technology. A series of exercises and training followed in the Hebrides, under the instruction of a retired Admiral 'who was a tough old salt':



We went out to sea each day testing our seamanship, our guns and our reaction to anything that may happen at sea. We also had one of our submarines with us to test our ASDIC equipment. We returned to Tobermory each night and anchored near the Admiral's base where he sent signals regularly to see our reaction. One of his signals came one night at 3am when we were all asleep. It read "A U boat has come alongside you to capture your ship". Alarm bells rang through the ship and we all got out of our hammocks (mostly with nothing on) and as there were no hand guns available, we dashed to the galley, took pans, frying pans etc and dashed to the side of the ship to repel boarders. The Admiral turned on his searchlights to see our response to his signal, but quickly turned them off when he saw the state of our dress.

I cannot overstress the importance of this period of getting the ship and crew ready for battle. Many of the exercises given by the Admiral (Commodore Stephenson) which seemed stupid at the time, were in fact experienced by us in battle and we owe our lives to him for our quick reaction when it was needed.

Bill and his crew now joined Second Support Group, under the command of Captain Walker, triple DSO.

Captain Walker's principle was to adopt an offensive role rather than a defensive one. There were enough ships to escort the convoys while we were to sink the U boats. . . Our month in the middle of the Atlantic was, to say the least, full of action and we had great success against the enemy. At the same time we saw many tragedies with our merchant seamen. We were continually rescuing them from oil-soaked seas when they suffered from getting oil in their lungs. We also did our best to save the U boat crews as they called out "Kamerad" and breathing what they thought was their last. One of the worst situations was when, one dark night, one of our super-tankers carrying



millions of gallons of fuel was torpedoed. The whole of the ship was ablaze and the sea around for 100 yards a raging inferno. As we were attacking the U boat we could hear the crew running around the deck, which was getting red hot, screaming as they faced death either by staying on the ship and being cremated, or jumping in the sea and frying.



HMS Magpie.

We encountered an Ace U boat Captain and attacked with depth charges all day with no success so *Magpie* tried with the Hedgehog (the first time it had been used by the Group). Hedgehog bombs are fired from the bow of the ship and fall in a circle 200 yards ahead. They only explode if they hit an object such as a U boat. We had two terrific explosions, one of which would blow the U boat wide open.

In a 10-day battle in March 1943, the Group sank 6 U boats;

After this one of our escort sloops *HMS Woodpecker* was hit by an acoustic torpedo and her stern was blown off. We took off all but six of the crew and started to tow her. We towed for four hundred miles but as we neared a U.K port we hit an Atlantic storm which opened up the wound and she turned over and sank to the bottom - but not before we had taken off her skeleton crew who had made such an effort to save her.

With us staying at sea for a month our food supply was running low. We ran out of potatoes and had to have boiled rice in lieu, milk ran out and we had no fresh vegetables. We had to go to a convoy to take on oil from a tanker once or twice which in itself is a feat of advanced seamanship.

On our return to our base at Liverpool, after we had sunk the six U boats and returned to Gladstone Dock, we found a typical Navy welcome. There were four thousand sailors and dockyard personnel plus a large gathering of Wrens cheering us in appreciation of our efforts and the First Lord of the Admiralty speaking to us from the jetty. There was free beer in Liverpool that night!

For his part in the action, Bill was awarded the DSM and the Citation reads:

Sir, I am commanded by My Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty to inform you that they have learned with great pleasure that, on the advice of the First Lord, the King has been graciously pleased to award you the Distinguished Service Medal for outstanding coolness, skill and devotion to duty shown in *HMS Magpie* in an operation carried out by the Second Support Group in the Atlantic in the course of which six enemy Submarines were sunk within ten days. This award was published in the London Gazette Supplement of 13th June 1944.



Bill was also involved in the Russian Convoys as well as preparations for D Day and bombardment in support of the landings:

We arrived (at Portsmouth) towards the end of May to find great activity in and around the port. We were told D Day was to be June 5th and our job was to go to Gold Beach and patrol it from about 11pm to 3am to make sure Germany had no unknown surprises for the attack. We set off but were recalled as the sea had "blown up" but it was to be better on June 6th. We repeated the plan of the previous night and this time it was Go Go Go!! From around midnight our bombers and troop carriers towing gliders started to fill the sky and the battle to free Europe had begun. We left the beach head about 2am and headed back across the Channel and met the armada of ships carrying the invasion force. What a great thrill!



Bill Smith in September 2002

Once the beach head had been established, *HMS Magpie* operated between Rosyth and Antwerp re-supplying the army. The war finally drew to its conclusion:

We were sailing north to Rosyth when we heard the news of peace being signed but were at sea through that night so missed the celebrations. Two days later we were sent over to Norway to take the surrender of the German garrisons in several of the fiord towns - a fine end to the war. *HMS Magpie* was a very special ship to me as I stood by her as she was being fitted out in Southampton Shipyard - sailed in her - and years later saw her broken up in Blyth, Northumberland.

Bill was demobbed in January 1946 and returned to his pre-war job as a Junior Clerk in the office of Rank-Hovis flour millers. He retired after 48 years service for the same company, as a Senior Manager at a mill in Rotherham. Sadly Bill died in 2003, leaving his 'brilliant wife' Florence, his son and three grandchildren.

Extracts from Bill's recollections and two of his photographs are also included in our History/Anniversaries section regarding the ill-fated [Russian convoy](#) PQ17