



A Home on the Rolling Main

**Revel Guest talks to A.G.F. (Tony) Ditcham DSC
about his experience of the War at Sea: 1940-45
HAY FESTIVAL - 16.00 on Sunday 1st June 2014 Event 456**



Tony Ditcham is 91 and leads a sociable, convivial life in Presteigne - a quiet country town in the Welsh borders, and a long way from the sea. However, in 1940 he was entered from HMS *Worcester* as a midshipman into the Royal Naval Reserve. Thereafter he served in every theatre of the European war at sea and eventually the Far East. Having been at sea for almost the entire period of the war, he was persuaded by Stephen Roskill some years later to write down his North Sea and Arctic convoy experiences as a junior officer for Naval Records. They were well received by Corelli Barnett and other leading naval historians, so much so that he was further induced to complete his recollections of the remaining part of the war, and the result was turned into a beautifully published book in 2012. There are plenty of books on the subject by senior naval officers, he considered, but few by a junior one – ‘there may be a little merit in the worm’s eye view’, he wrote.

***A Home on the Rolling Main* by AGF Ditcham has enjoyed remarkable success** and has subsequently been republished in softback by Seaforth Publishing (part of Pen and Sword). The book’s reception went far beyond what is usual in such cases, being hailed by admirals and historians alike. The great volume of letters he subsequently received from readers is a testament to its significance and he has been invited to talk about the book at the Hay Festival. Reviewers have compared his book to Nicholas Monsarrat’s *The Cruel Sea* in its realistic description of the heroic struggle in the seas around Europe that was, as Winston Churchill put it, the decisive factor in the eventual defeat of Hitler.

Few of his Royal Navy contemporaries are still alive. Their annual reunions came to a close in 2005. Tony Ditcham is perhaps unique in that he survives in good health. He combines a photographic memory with an ability to recall and, with great humour, factually recount the story of these remarkable events. He served from Scapa Flow down to Gibraltar. He saw action patrolling Britain’s vital East Coast shipping lanes, from the North Sea to Iceland and the Faroes, to the Atlantic. One of the destroyers in which he served dodged four pairs of E-Boat torpedoes fired in a space of five minutes. As a gunnery officer on fleet destroyers escorting the Arctic convoys, which had to run the gauntlet of the hostile forces in Norway to reach Murmansk, he witnessed at first hand the sinking of the *Scharnhorst* at the Battle of North Cape. His same ship, HMS *Scorpion*, took part in the bombardment of the Normandy coast immediately prior to and after the D-Day landings (*Operation Neptune*) in June 1944. His last ship, HMS *Finisterre*, returned him to the hotter climes of the Mediterranean and eventually the Far East. Ditcham does not just describe engagements with the enemy; he conjures up what life was like on board ship in terrifying times. He remembers vividly the ships’ companies and individual personalities – officers and ratings – and life-long friends with whom he served. He evokes the typical anecdotal culture of the Royal Navy at a time when it too could claim that ‘this was one of their finest hours’.

At the Hay Festival on Sunday 1st June, he will talk to Revel Guest of these things (he is a brilliant speaker) and draw upon his extraordinary personal collection of photos of ships and men at war. And also, no mean artist himself, the sketches he made at the time – not least the colourful and explosive end of the *Scharnhorst*.

2014 is the 70th anniversary of the Normandy landings. Tony Ditcham’s recollections could not be a more fitting and timely reminder of the part the Royal Navy plays in safeguarding Britain’s dependence upon the sea for its prosperity and security.