

Transcript

Of

MR A.G.F DITCHAM

00:00 A.G.F Ditcham: Elsewhere, on the sea or in the air, depended ultimately on its outcome. In other words if we didn't win the Battle of the Atlantic, we had lost the war. The other thing is the Germans knew that as well, hence the great efforts they made with U-Boats to sink all our trade and shipping coming from America or anywhere else and in 1943 they jolly nearly succeeded. So what you have to bear in mind from the very beginning is that the public in general thought that the war, which began in 1939, was the "Phoney War" until the Germans invaded France in May 1940. But it wasn't a "Phoney War" at sea, on the very first day that war was declared, the 3rd of September 1939, a liner called the "Athenia" was torpedoed on her way to America full of civilians and there was heavy loss of life. So that went on, in varying degrees, throughout the war. The Battle of the Atlantic, you have to remember that this country imported 90% of what we eat and what we use. Oil, gas, food, fresh everything has to come from overseas which is why we have always needed a big navy, and is why we still need one even though we don't have a big one anymore. The other thing is that everybody says the Battle of the Atlantic was desperate convoy battles in the Atlantic and that is very true. But it wasn't only the U-boats and the S Corps that we had to deal with. There were very large, very formidable German warships, which if they had got into the Atlantic could have greatly damaged or even halted all ship movements across the Atlantic. You have to remember, for example, the famous escape of the *Bismarck*, which was the greatest warship in the world at the time she was caught by HMS Hood and HMS Prince of Wales and she sank Hood very quickly as she was an old, 30 year old, ship. But we eventually caught her and sank her. The point of that story is the *Bismarck* was such a powerful ship that we needed two of our own battleships to cope with her on her own. We didn't have enough Battleships even to contemplate doing that. If she had gotten into the Atlantic and roamed about at will she would have been a permanent danger to all our convoys and we would have had to escort very few convoys with all our battle fleet and we would've slowly starved. So although the Battle of the Atlantic is thought of as the U-boat battle it was the continual fight to keep the German warships out of the Atlantic and if necessary catch them in the open sea and sink them or bomb them in their harbours. So there was very hard fighting between convoys and convoy escorts. There was a nice story told, two of the very famous ships of the bird class which were all called Woodpecker, Magpie, Wild Swan etc. They were extremely effective ships and they were very good at sinking U-boats and the captain in charge of them a famous man eventually died of overwork. But he sank more U-boats than any other single commanding officer. One day they were attacking and instead of defending convoys they were attacking a group of U-boats and they sank one and rescued, as we always tried to do, the entire crew of this U-boat.

05:12 A.G.F Ditcham Nobody was lost, the captain and the whole crew were brought on-board the Woodpecker. The captain of the U-boat was put down in one of the cabins in the after end of the ship. He could feel the revolutions of the propellers of the ship going round and he said to himself, "that is a dangerous speed because it could be heard by an acoustic torpedo and the acoustic torpedo would find this ship which I'm in having been rescued." He thought, "I wonder if I should warn the Captain that he's going the wrong speed," and then he said, "No I'm not I'm on the other side aren't I. I shan't tell him that." Shortly after that the ship was struck by an acoustic torpedo and HMS Woodpecker started to sink. So, the entire ship's company of Woodpecker and the entire rescued U-boat crew stood on the deck slowly sinking, until HMS Magpie came alongside. Not an easy thing in the open Atlantic, two ships to come alongside, heaving and crashing about, liable to damage each other. As Magpie approached them the captain of the Woodpecker, busy sinking, was standing next to the captain of the U-boat he had just sunk and rescued. The captain of the English ship said to the U-boat captain, "one-all I think."

6:56 A.G.F Ditcham Although it was a hard fought war it was kept reasonably humane, when possible. But there was another occasion in a very crucial, horrible convoy battle a large number of ships had been sunk with about 6 U-boats involved. It was dark and rough and a British destroyer sank a U-boat, whose crew bailed out when it came to the surface and were swimming desperately in the sea, but the convoy had moved on, it was a huge battle going on. The destroyer which had just sunk the U-boat had to get back to the convoy and join in the fight. There was no question of stopping to pick up enemy survivors, not on that occasion and we didn't really like U-boats very much. They struck without warning, in the dark and it was perfectly horrible. On this occasion the destroyer rushed off leaving the Germans in the sea and they shone a search light to the East and as they went past they shouted "Germany's that way." That wasn't a very nice thing to have to do, but that's all they could do. But, on the two occasions when my ship had to rescue German survivors, we did our very utmost to get them out of the sea and give them food and water and clean straw. Don't let me give you the impression that war is in anyway fun, it is extremely unpleasant and you have to do unpleasant things. On that score I can tell you another story.

09:31 A.G.F Ditcham Talking about how nasty war is, there are three things that affect a sailor during the war: sleep, weather and the enemy. The enemy comes a bad third, because, in my experience, sleep was in very short supply. For example, if you were doing four hours on and four hours off, you might do the watch from eight until midnight and you would then have three and a half hours in your bunk, or your hammock, and you would be back on the bridge at four in the morning after three and a half hours of sleep. That, day after day, grinds you down and I have sometimes, standing on the bridge as officer of the watch, I have had to keep my eyes open, because if I took my hands away they would have snapped shut like a camera. One wasn't so sleepy that one was endangering the ship. But the loss of sleep was, in my memory, the worst factor of all. The other factor was the weather; it was very seldom calm, especially in the Atlantic and even more so in the Arctic, the weather was always foul. That meant we were being thrown about all the time and is possibly the only exercise we used to get was counteracting the roll of the ship. That and running up four of five ladders to

get to the bridge in a hurry. So, the Germans only came our way occasionally and when they did it was not a great deal of fun. But, those were the factors; lack of sleep, awful weather and the Germans. That is the reason why the navy has a saying that, “The only difference between peace and war is that in war the target fires back,” of course even in peace-time the weather can be foul and you get little sleep.

12:08 A.G.F Ditcham To illustrate that point, I remember one occasion loitering off the Norwegian coast, with a large fleet of aircraft carriers and battleships and any number of destroyers, to fly off aircraft and attack the *Tirpitz*. The *Tirpitz* was another battleship like the *Bismarck*, bigger and better and stronger than any of ours, which would've needed two ships to take her on. So she was a menace in lying in the Norwegian fjords she was a permanent menace to our navy and our ships and she had to be eliminated. Why did she have to be eliminated? Well we wanted to send a large fleet to Japan which was, by this time, in the war and we had to keep two battleships at home in case *Tirpitz* got out, as soon as we could eliminate the *Tirpitz* we could send another two modern battleships out to the Far-East. So we were trying very hard to bomb her in the Norwegian fjord where she lay. We went to sea with this big fleet of aircraft carriers and we steamed up and down the Norwegian coast for 10 days and there wasn't a single day in which we could fly off an aeroplane, far less get it back on-board. So after 10 days we had to go back to harbour and we were all pretty tired after 10 days of foul weather, constant vigilance and zigzagging around.

14:05 A.G.F Ditcham We got back to Scapa Flow and we were told, three of us, “refuel at once, and proceed with all dispatch to the convoy coming back from Russia which has had 3 escorts sunk and reinforce the convoy.” We were all looking forward to a night in our hammocks after 10 days of Norway. Not a bit of it, we went straight back to Russia at high-speed, or half way because the convoy was half-way back. So that was the pressure under which we worked. I haven't worked so hard since, I am happy to tell you.

14:52 A.G.F Ditcham You may wonder what it was like to be under hostile fire. I experienced a certain amount of it and I came to the conclusion that the best thing to do was to have a demanding job to do. If you had to aim a gun, for example, or busy with navigation or doing the zigzag, or something whatever it was. If you had something on which to concentrate that was fine, but if you had not much to do it was quite worrying. I remember the first time, I was 17 at the time, we were off Norway I was then in a battle cruiser and we were bombed by Heinkel twin engine bombers who did shallow dive-bombing. It was the first time I had been threatened by these nasty people and I didn't like it at all because all I had to do, I was on the bridge with the Captain and the Officer of the Watch, was to write in the ship's logbook “22:00 Opened fire,” “22:08 Ceased fire.” That wasn't much of a job and I remember being considerably scared, but the trick was not to show it. So you could chew halfway through your bottom lip rather than show it. The other time I remember was in a destroyer when we went over a mine. I happened again to be on the bridge with the captain of this much smaller ship, and there was an almighty bang and I rose in the air and banged my head, I came down again and I said to myself, “Well that was bound to happen sooner or later, what a rare thing it is to have a nice calm day.” It was in fact an absolute flat calm summer's day so I thought, “Well that was very kind of god to arrange a nice calm sea for us,

and when the water reaches me I'll just float off the top and breast stroke away." I imagined with this colossal explosion that there was a huge hole in the engine room, which I knew well because I had just done a month's training in it, there'd be scalding steam which can strip not only your clothes but your skin off your body. Scalding steam from the boilers was escaping, water gushing in and the boilers, perhaps, about to explode because we happened to be going 90% full power at the time. I was just thinking, "Thank god I'm on the bridge," and the captain who was quite unmoved, although he had nearly been killed by falling debris, captain was quite unmoved by all this and I hear him say very calmly, "Stop those engines", and then he turned to me and said, "Ditcham go to the engine room and bring me a report." The engine room was the one place I didn't want to go. But I had learned that the one thing you do is to obey orders without question, without stopping to think. As I ran across the bridge to go down my knees felt as if they were trying to go the other way and I knew then that I was distinctly frightened. But that was because I had nothing much to do, except obey orders, but I hadn't a purpose on which to concentrate and I was scared. Fortunately, all other times, I was less scared, or not at all, but the trick is for anybody who has the mind to go to war to have something to do.

19:18 A.G.F Ditcham On that point about giving orders: those orders were given to me in a calm voice. That's what I noticed throughout my service, orders were given in a calm way and that given the proper leaders, who don't lose their heads, that is one of the great lessons I've learned: give your orders in a calm fashion and don't communicate excitement or panic. I particularly remember when we were engaged in a torpedo attack on a German battleship, which was not a recipe for good health, this battle, unlike the concept most people may have of a battle, was not fought in brilliant sunshine, flat calm and lovely weather. It was fought on Boxing Day, as it happened, mid-Winter therefore, pitch dark because it was in the arctic, and a full gale had been blowing for 10 days. It was just about the wrong time and place and weather to fight any sort of a battle, but particularly one against such heavy odds, because the four destroyers, in which I was in one, which were ordered to torpedo this battleship. So, we started to return towards this battleship after a long chase, because she was nearly as fast as we were and we had to get ahead of her in order to make a torpedo attack. After a long chase the phone to me was picked up by the second in command because I was the gunnery officer in the tower above the bridge, he picked up the phone to me in a very desperate situation, because within the next 15 minutes we should have expected, I didn't I was just hoping it wouldn't be the case, we could've been blown clean out of the water by this German battleship. He picked up the phone, he said to me in a very calm voice as if saying, "We're going to have lunch in an hour's time," he said, "We are going into attack now," so that was the calm way he delivered the order. The next thing was, one was used to getting the order to open fire by someone picking up the phone and saying, "Open fire!" in an authoritative and urgent tone. On this occasion we hadn't been allowed to open fire for such a long time because the enemy hadn't seen us and we didn't want to attract attention to ourselves. So this chap picked up the phone to me, in what could have been a desperate situation, and said, "You may open fire now," I very nearly said, "Oh thank you very much," but that I learned was the way to give an order.

22:50 A.G.F Ditcham My captain, at this time, who told me afterward he expected us in this attack to be sunk or expect 50% casualties, reducing us to a virtual shambles, he knew this and having turned the ship in to do the attack, I could see him from where I was, eight feet above the bridge, I could see leaning against the compass pinnacle, which is a pillar with the compass on top, with his cap pushed back stirring a cup of cocoa. That was his way of communicating insouciance and calm which spread throughout the ship. I don't think any of the sailors, including me, were terribly worried because of this example set by our two superiors. The other thing is we went down from Scapa Flow down to the Solent in order to carry out the Normandy invasion, as you probably all learned we were due to sail on the 4th and land on the 5th of June. But it was postponed because the weather was so foul, like I said. The weather was so foul on the 4th June, in midsummer, in the English Channel, not fair! So, it was postponed we were due to sail on the 5th and land on the 6th. It was so marvellous not to be in Scapa Flow not doing convoys, or whatever, the whole ship's company was asleep, they had been for 2 or 3 days since we had arrived in the Solent. Everybody was asleep, except me, I was walking up and down the Fauxall, which is the sharp end of the ship, taking some exercise and getting ready to pull up the anchor, because that was my job, and sail for Normandy. But we didn't know whether the weather was going to permit it and we were told to await orders. Finally, the captain got the famous signal, "Sail in execution of previous orders," which he knew what they were. He said to himself, "I must tell all the officers and the ship's company." So, he came out of his cabin and stepped out onto the Fauxhall which I was walking up and down and his way of announcing the beginning of the greatest amphibious expedition of all time, and the battle which had to be won if we were going to win the war, he stepped onto the Fauxhall and seeing nobody there but me he said, "The party's on," and disappeared that was his calm and insouciant way of telling us what we were about. Those calm orders are the basis, I think, of leadership in war.

26:30 A.G.F Ditcham On that point I will tell you a story about Lord Mountbatten who was captain of a flotilla of destroyers, many of which were sunk because they were in the hardest of the fighting from the beginning of the war. Most of them were sunk in the Mediterranean by dive-bombers. There isn't much defence you can do against dive-bombers screaming down at 80 or 70 degrees. So, he used to have a midshipman each side of the bridge and facing the dive-bombers on whichever side they came. The dive-bomber would come screaming down the midshipman would be looking out like that and his job was to call out to the captain, when he could see what was happening, "Bomb doors open, sir," and a moment later they would call out, "Bombs away, sir," and at that moment Mountbatten or any other destroyer captain going flat out, about 35 miles an hour, would shove the helm over and go straight round. There was just time to get out of the way, a matter of seconds but just time and dodge the actual impact of the bomb. On this occasion he was unlucky and the ship going at full speed and under full rudder heels over at quite a degree. While he was doing this the bomb which he was trying to dodge landed smack alongside the engine room, blew the side in which started to flood, and instead of coming upright again at 30knots she went steadily over until she was upside down with her funnel pointing upwards. Still going fast and still going down. Mountbatten, who was standing on the bridge, found himself upside down on his own bridge, several fathoms underwater and going at high speed. He says that for some

reason his tin hat, that he was wearing, saved his life, because it made him that much heavier than everything else around him, and he was able to escape from his ship downwards, and then out, and then he managed to come to the surface where I'm quite sure he threw off his tin hat. The point of the story which I've heard him tell was that: he came to the surface and there was quite a lot of debris and quite a lot of sailors swimming about. One of them was a stoker who saw him bob to the surface and he called out to him, "Funny how all the scum comes to the surface sir!" I know that's true because a long time afterwards they used to do on the Television a series called "This is Your Life." They used to get some celebrity like Mountbatten or whoever, famous actor perhaps, to come and be interviewed and to meet a lot of his friends who influenced his career. One day Mountbatten was doing this, "This is Your Life," one of the people they suddenly produced from the wings was this stoker. He was called by name, you see, and Mountbatten who never forgot anybody's name, he turned round and he said, "You're the damned man who said there's scum on the surface!" So I know the story's true. So we did have an occasional laugh, but you had to make them usually.

31:07 A.G.F Ditcham As you gather I have written a book. I didn't ever intend to write it, I was asked to put some memoirs on paper for the benefit of archives and museums. When I'd done it they said, "This is very interesting you should turn it into a book." So I did but I never had any intention of writing one, apart from anything else we never really talked about the war. I can remember lots of people when I was a small boy my father, like most people, had fought in the trenches in the First War. People always used to say they never talked about it and my generation didn't talk much about the Second war either. In fact I shared a cabin with a chap for 2 years, who had been very badly wounded in his previous ship and it prevented him from raising his arm above his shoulder, one of his arms. Many years later he was helping me sail my boat, when I was a lot younger than I am now and I could sail a boat, he was a bit awkward in pulling the sail up and then he explained to me that he couldn't raise one arm above his shoulder but we'd shared a cabin for two years and he never explained that he had a damaged shoulder. The point of that is that I never intended to write a book, and what I have written could have been written better by at least 1,200 officers and 40,000 sailors. They all had the same sort of experiences and worse, many cases much worse experiences so don't think I am in any way unique. I only wrote the wretched book because I was told to. You sometimes hear, in the press particularly, about heroes who did this and who did that and especially in recent years they talk about people who are heroes because they went on arctic convoys to Russia. Well I spent 2 and a quarter years doing Arctic convoys to Russia and I was never a hero I assure you because we didn't think of ourselves as anything special, we had been very highly trained, we had a lot of experience and it was our job to do it and we weren't being heroes at all. I was trying to explain this to a newspaper man once, when he interviewed me, and he said, "Ah, but I detect from what you say a zest for action," I thought about this and it's true, we did have a zest for a battle because we had been highly trained to do it and if we didn't do it we shouldn't win the war. Each of us had the prime objective of winning the war, and doing our bit about it and it didn't make us heroes. I'll tell you who the heroes were: those were the chaps, some civilians some serving officers, who took unexploded 1 tonne mines or bombs apart to see what counter-measures we could use against them. This was particularly true of magnetic mines which turned up when the tide

went out, and there they were stranded on the beach. Then these chaps would have to go out there with a screwdriver and take the thing to pieces, in the certain knowledge that there were 4, if not 6, booby trap fuses on board and if they made the wrong move they wouldn't know what had hit them. So dangerous was it that they used to take a telephone with a 300 yard long flex to a mate who was back there listening and he would say, "I am now undoing the square plate marked... and I'm undoing the first screw," and so on. Many of them were blown to smithereens. If you want to know what a hero is, that's what he is.

36:10 A.G.F Ditcham But I've told you a lot of nasty things, we did try to amuse ourselves and fortunately I discovered the navy is never short of a joke about something and the worse things get the more likely they are to produce a joke about it. But a peacetime joke I can tell you is about an admiral inspecting his new command ashore, which was a big shore establishment. You may know, it's probably the same in all walks of life, if you do a job you have a designated title, and you abbreviate that. So, the gunnery officer of the 23rd Destroyer Flotilla would be called, "G.O 23." If the phone rang he would pick it up and say, "G.O 23." If the flag officer was wanted by one of his staff he would pick up the phone and say, "F.O.H." With this in mind, this admiral was inspecting the offices he'd just inherited and he saw on the door of one, it read, "Engineering Information and Equipment Installation Officer," and the Admiral said to the captain of the base who was with him, "That's a very long-winded title, I've never heard that one before," the captain said, "No sir, he invented it himself because he's always wanted to pick up the telephone and say, E.I.E.I.O." So on that happy note. **(Film Begins)**