

John (Jack) Bonthron JX287386 RN

30-Oct-1921- ?-Sep-1997

Below is a synoptic account of the service in HMS Submarines compiled from interviews in 1989 by Stuart Bonthron (Grandson) then aged 13 when Jack was 68.

Thanks also due to Mike Kemble for the information supplied through his website at:

<http://www.39-45war.com/britsubsibyl.html>

Conscription.

Jack was conscripted in June 1941 (aged 19). He was an apprentice joiner at the time. His father William had been gassed in WW1 and was against Jack joining up and had tried to get him into a reserved occupation like his other siblings. Jack was the only one of his immediate family to serve in the Forces.

Jack requested the Navy and was sent for Submarine Training. He served for 5 years. The last months before his demob were spent at Dunrobin Castle (Sutherland, NE Scotland) where he carried out light duties as a an Officer's Steward (perhaps with his Captain Lt. EJD Turner?) and underwent treatment for "Nerves", (now called Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)), which condition persisted throughout his life, returning mainly during periods of stress at home or at work.

Training.

His 10 weeks basic training was on HMS Raleigh at Devonport followed by 4 weeks on a Gunnery course. He was now an Ordinary Seaman (Hostilities Only, as he often said).

Jack was then drafted to HMS Elfin, Blyth, Northumberland, for 8 weeks of basic submarine training. He often spoke of this period with affection. It was during this time that he had a 'romantic encounter'.

He then went to HMS H50 (a WW1 Submarine) for electrical training. HMS H50 (no other name) was based on the north coast of Northern Ireland where the H50 was the 'target' used for Anti-Submarine Training. During this period on runs ashore he re-connected with his Aunt Jenny (his Mum's sister) and his cousins (four girls of his own age) who lived in Garrison, County Fermanagh, where as a boy he had spent many long summer holidays. Dancing with his four girl cousins and their friends was his key leisure activity. He was a very good ballroom dancer: his favourite dance was the Slow Foxtrot.

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To War.

In the autumn of 1942 Jack was drafted to HMS Maidstone (a Submarine Depot Ship) based at Gibraltar, awaiting posting to the Mediterranean submarine flotilla. The sub he was assigned to sailed without him because he was injured playing in a football match (at No.4 Right Wing Half for the Navy v Army).

When fit he was posted to HMS Sybil (also spelled Sibyl?) in October 1942. This was a Special Operations submarine commanded by Lt. EJD Turner DSO DSC RN: in time Jack became his personal steward. At sea everyone was dog-tired and like others, when due on Watch the Skipper was often hard to rouse. Jack would have to shout at him to wake him. "You must NEVER **touch** an Officer!"

As a teenager Jack had badly injured his left elbow in a fall. Bones were shattered and nerves damaged. As children he would hold his elbow to our ears and we could hear the grinding noise from the shattered bone fragments as he moved it.

Although it functioned well enough and was almost as strong, his left arm was thinner and slightly deformed. Apart from recurring pain, this usually flaring up under emotional stress, he was self-conscious of its appearance; he would often long spend periods comparing both arms. That this was a source of "conflict" with his shipmates was mentioned repeatedly in post-war years.

On board the sleeping and messing arrangements were laissez-faire:

Officers: amidships

Seamen: fore-end

Stokers: aft-end

With a crew of 42 plus special ops 'Guests', the ship was crowded and everyone lived in the other's pockets: life histories, experiences, hopes, desires, intimate/personal details and 'secrets' were 'shared' remorselessly. The ship's company was split into three Watches, Red, White and Blue.

At sea the ship, (or the 'boat', as Jack always called her), would normally operate a dog watch system.

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(The Royal Navy traditional submarine three watch system is 2 hours on 4 off during the day (8 a.m. to 8 p.m.) and 3 hours on 6 off during the night (8 p.m. to 8 a.m.)).

Seamen slept wherever they could find a space, often leading to 'territorial and inter-personal conflicts'. As mentioned above, everyone was tired and fractious and, like Jack, living on their nerves.

Apart from the Skipper, who was from Helensburgh, Jack was the only 'Jock' on board. Others found his Glaswegian accent difficult. But he adapted and ended the war with a much clearer accent and a strong respect for authority.

He often felt he was picked on and, regardless of the weather, he would happily trade his rum and cigarette allowances for a duty swap so that he would be topsides during the four or so hours the ship was on the surface to re-charge her batteries. His favourite duty was to be standing at the open fore hatch alone, scanning the dark seas with binoculars, fuelled to stay awake by strong sweet cocoa. "I loved the smells blowing out to us, even though we normally couldn't see any land."

On his return below he would pick a spot and fall immediately asleep: a contrast with final years when he seldom slept easily.

Food and fuel and living under the waves.

Fresh food went quickly 'off' because of lack of oxygen, and high humidity and limited refrigerated storage. Most food was tinned. Jack thought the food on board was "excellent" and plentiful: perhaps not surprising as he was fourth in a working class family of seven.

During the first few days at sea a few people were sea-sick. Jack was lucky, he was never affected.

The fuel lasted for an average of 8 weeks with a maximum endurance of about 12 weeks.

When submerged Jack operated one of the fore hydroplanes. Maintaining neutral buoyancy was a constant anxiety, especially close to the surface to avoid the Sybil 'popping up' to reveal herself on the surface and thereby making herself a target for enemy planes, shore batteries and E-Boats (motor torpedo boats)

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designed to hunt submarines. Jack's role was clearly a responsible and stressful one.

On average they stayed submerged for around 20 hours at a time. The normal limit of endurance was 36 hours by which time everyone was breathless. The Sybil's maximum safe depth was 700 feet. Most of the Med is deeper and so she seldom settled on the bottom.

Jack told of an occasion when they were trapped on the bottom by an E-Boat and were depth-charged repeatedly:

"The Skipper knew it was waiting up tops for us to make a move. He kept us under until our noses and ears were bleeding. We were under for nearly two days, I think, before we crept away and then surfaced. It was night-time and he made us sit quietly, listening and watching before we were allowed to start the diesels."

Sybil had two diesels, one port one starboard and these were used to drive the propellers and to re-charge the electric batteries (120 cells) which were used to drive the submarine and its systems when submerged.

Battle.

The biggest hazards were the German/Italian minefields. During the 1942/43 period the RN Submarines Flotilla was very important in disrupting the Italian ships taking supplies to Tubruk for their own troops and to Rommel.

If attacking a convoy or protected ship a submarine was usually between 4 to 8 miles from its target. Even then the 32 foot periscope would only be raised for a few seconds at a time, particularly during a daytime attack. Torpedoes travelled at about 45 mph and so the torpedo might be 'running' for many minutes such that the wake of a torpedo in a calm sea could reveal the presence of the submarine to any spotting aircraft.

For smaller or unprotected vessels the main gun on the foredeck was used, to conserve torpedoes which were very expensive. When the Sybil came to the surface to attack she did so very quickly. Jack was the gun-layer, responsible for setting the gun elevation, and as the Sybil surfaced rapidly, Jack as part of the gun crew would race to the gun, often while the deck was still awash. It was a 3" gun with a 4.5 mile range. To keep themselves safe they usually kept as far from their targets as possible.

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Spies, Saboteurs and Trains.

A lot of what the Sybil did was called Special Operations, going as close to the enemy shore as possible to drop off and pick up spies and saboteurs (usually Marine Commandoes). In the later stages of the war the Sybil shelled train lines and other targets along the Italian coast when the smoking Vesuvius was a convenient navigational aid.

(During a Cruise holiday in 1992, Jack had a 'run ashore' for a few hours in Naples where he happily told the waiter who brought him a coffee: "The last time I was here, son, was when we were shelling you from just offshore, 1943 I think it was." Thankfully the waiter smiled, took his tip and left, hopefully uncomprehending.)

On one occasion the Sybil was on the surface and the weather was rough. Jack was in the conning tower steering; the Sybil was plunging into the waves and the compass was whirling back and forth. Jack was finding it difficult to steer a straight course. The Skipper piped from below:

"Who has the helm?"

"Ordinary Seaman Bonthron, sir."

"Bonthron! I should have guessed; are you trying to write your name in the sea?"

The following pages provide other information about HMS Sybil.

<http://uboaat.net/allies/warships/ship/3436.html>

There is also a Wikipedia link:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMS_Sibyl_\(P217\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMS_Sibyl_(P217))

HMS Sibyl (P217)



Laid Down: 31 December 1940
Launched: 29 April 1942
Completed: 16 August 1942
Built: Cammell Laird Birkenhead
Type S Gp 3

"Of all the branches of men in the Forces, there is none which shows more devotion and faces grimmer perils than the submariner.
Great deeds are done in the air and on the land; nevertheless, nothing surpasses your exploits."
Winston Churchill.

"Only in attack does a submarine reveal herself, before creeping away to the concealment of the deep"

I received several images of HMS Sibyl. I checked up on a listing of British Submarines on <http://www.secondworldwar.org.uk/britsublist.html> and Sibyl is listed thus:

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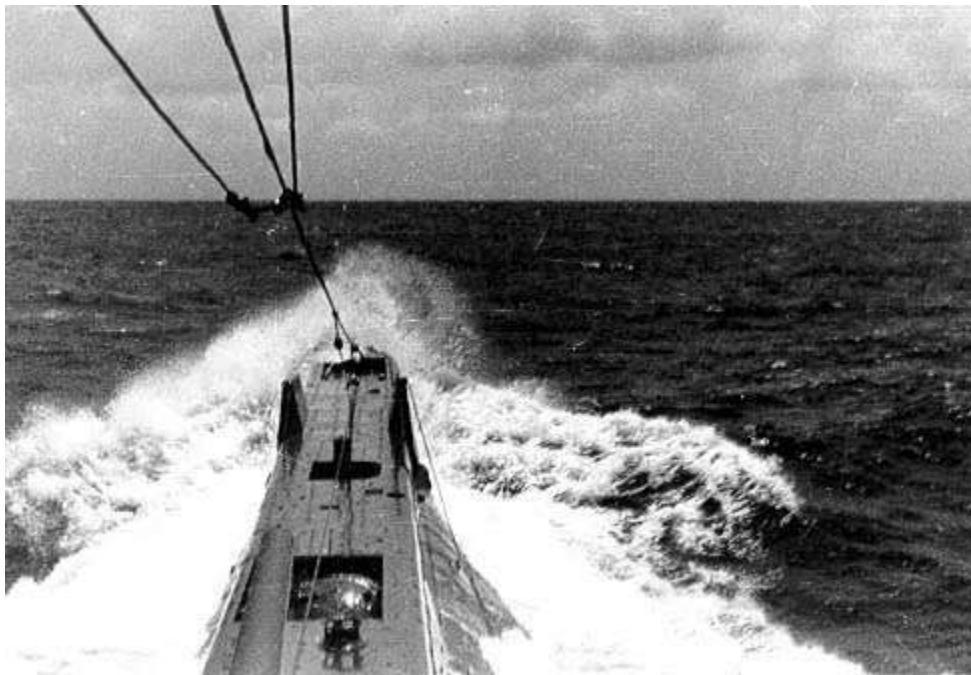
Special Ops. Sometimes referred to as *Sybil*(?). Commanded by Lt. E.J.D. Turner, DSC, sailed 8-Nov-42 for a rendezvous on the south coast of France. Picked up seven staff officers and officials, including one woman, of General Giraud's staff. Took them to Algiers on 11-Nov. See also [Seraph](#). Later in Eastern Fleet (Lt. H.R. Murray). An S3 class, pennant number P217; crew of 48. Launched at Cammell Laird Birkenhead on 1 April 1942 and ended her life as scrap on 1 Mar 1948.

Events

- [14-03-1943](#): HMS Sibyl torpedoes and sinks the Italian merchant Pegli 6 nautical miles off Cape Gallo, Sicily.
- [11-04-1943](#): HMS Sibyl fires four torpedoes against the Italian merchant Fabriano about 10 nautical miles north-north-west of Punta Raisi, Sicily, Italy. All torpedoes missed their target.
- [22-09-1943](#): HMS Sibyl fires four torpedoes against a merchant in a German convoy some 5 nautical miles south of Sestri Levante, Liguria, Italy. All torpedoes missed their target.
- [23-09-1943](#): HMS Sibyl torpedoes and sinks the French (in German service) merchant St.Nazaire about 8 nautical miles west of Sestri Levante, Italy.
- [30-09-1943](#): HMS Sibyl torpedoes and sinks the German auxiliary minesweeper M 7022/Hummer about 12 nautical miles north-east of Bastia, Corsica, France.
- [15-11-1943](#): HMS Sibyl sinks the Greek sailing vessel Trias with gunfire off Mitylene, Greece.
- [19-11-1943](#): HMS Sibyl sinks a Greek sailing vessel with gunfire in the Gulf of Saloniki, Greece.
- [20-11-1943](#): HMS Sibyl sinks two Greek sailing vessels with gunfire in the Gulf of Saloniki, Greece.
- [21-11-1943](#): HMS Sibyl sinks a Greek sailing vessel with gunfire in the Gulf of Saloniki, Greece.
- [08-01-1944](#): HMS Sibyl sinks the Greek sailing vessel Taxiachos with gunfire off Cape Baba, Turkey.
- [09-01-1944](#): HMS Sibyl sinks a sailing vessel with gunfire off Baba Burnu, Turkey.
- [08-02-1944](#): HMS Sibyl fires two torpedoes against the German tanker Centaur off Crete. Both torpedoes missed their target.
- [08-05-1945](#): Between 8 May 1945 and 31 May 1945 HMS Sibyl sinks five Japanese sailing vessels with gunfire and scuttling charges in the Malacca Strait.
- [10-07-1945](#): HMS Sibyl sinks 11 small Japanese vessels with gunfire in the Stait of Malacca.
- [12-09-1945](#): HMS Sibyl was the first British submarine to surface in Singapore harbour at the surrender of the Japanese.

<http://www.rnsubs.co.uk/Boats/BoatDB2/index.php?BoatID=359>

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