

## **John Andrews 1939-. Royal Navy Aberystwyth, Ceredigion**

West Wales Veterans Archive, National Library of Wales

Date of interview: 18.11.19. Aberystwyth

### **Description**

John Andrews was born just 5 months before the outbreak of WW2 in Birkenhead. Very sadly John lost his brother and two sisters as the result of a Luftwaffe bombing attack on Birkenhead which destroyed the family house. For a period during the War, John was evacuated to Llangollen before returning to Birkenhead. Inspired by stories from a great uncle who had served at sea during WW1, John joined the Navy as soon as he was old enough in 1955, aged 16yrs, training as a junior engineer mechanic. For the next five years or so, he served on former WW2 ships sailing across the world and was engaged in the Suez Crisis.

In Singapore, John had the opportunity to experience life on board a Royal Navy submarine and decided then and there that his future lay as a Submariner. John spent the next seven years serving on conventional submarines and then the remaining sixteen years of his Royal Navy career on nuclear submarines becoming Charge Chief Mech and was actively involved in the Royal Navy's underwater activities designed to counter the Soviet submarine threat.

In civilian life, John's employment included working as 'Test Team Leader' at 'Sizewell B' nuclear power station in Suffolk. In 1985 he moved to Aberystwyth, working as a support worker in Aberystwyth Day Centre and then drew upon his considerable engineering experience to help to restore the Funicular Cliff Railway located on Constitution Hill in Aberystwyth. John is currently secretary of the Aberystwyth Branch of the Royal British Legion and is the Wales Branch Treasurer of the Submariners Association.

### **Early Life**

John was born in Birkenhead on 7th April 1939.

Aged three and poorly with tonsillitis John was sent for a short time to stay with his nearby grandmother. This act saved him from the effect of the Luftwaffe bombing of Birkenhead which destroyed his parents' family home with the loss of John's brother, two sisters and a cousin, though John's mother survived the attack. His father was away in the Army at the time. John has no recollection of these traumatic early days in his life following which he and his mother were evacuated from Birkenhead to picturesque Garth, Llangollen. After the war John attended the primary school in Heswall, Wirral before winning a scholarship to become a pupil in the Grammar school in Birkenhead.

### **First Years in the Royal Navy**

John had been captivated by a great uncle who had served in the Navy during WW1, and an uncle in WW2, and so aged 16yrs in 1955 he joined the Royal Navy. During that period there

was a huge influx into the Navy to replace the WW2 veterans who were leaving or who had already left in the immediate post-war years.

John entered as a Junior Engineering Mechanic 2<sup>nd</sup> Class and after training at HMS Raleigh in Torpoint, Cornwall, was posted to his first ship, HMS *Ocean*, a former WW2-era aircraft carrier which had been re-equipped as a Home Fleet training ship. John was serving on *Ocean* when it was on active operations during the Suez crises of 1956. In the first ever large-scale helicopter borne assault, Westland Whirlwind and Bristol Sycamore helicopters from *Ocean* and HMS *Theseus* landed 425 men of 45 Commando and 23 tons of stores into Port Said in 90 minutes. John recalled that *Ocean* also acted as hospital ship taking the wounded to Malta.

HMS *Ocean* then spent 6 months based in the Home Fleet from Plymouth, sailing to Germany and Iceland, and it was here that John personally witnessed 'the mirage of Reykjavik', a miraculous city appearing in sky way above the sea, the mirage then disappearing as the ship moved closer to the entrance to Reykjavik.

By the end of 1957, John had been posted to HMS *Gambia*, an old WW2 Cruiser (which from 1943-46 had been taken over by the Royal New Zealand Navy). John recalls his time aboard *Gambia* as 'fantastic' taking in places across Europe and the Med before being sent east of Suez to Mombasa, Seychelles, Pakistan, India with typhoon relief in Mauritius, The Red Sea, Durban, Capetown and Freetown in South Africa before eventually returning home. It was on the *Gambia* in Singapore that John's future career as a Submariner was sealed.

### **'Conventional' Submarines**

In Singapore, the 'A' Class HMS/M *Alliance* of the 7<sup>th</sup> Submarine Squadron based there offered day trips as the Submarine Service was on the lookout for volunteers. John was one of those interested. This was then followed by a longer three-day opportunity and John recalled:

*"I was a bit apprehensive at first but as soon as I got on board, I couldn't believe that orders were given in a calm and ordinary tone of voice, no shouting. It was very professional and within 10mins I absolutely loved it and knew this was where my career would be. It also paid far better and doubled the pay I was receiving. I returned to Gambia to then volunteer for submarines".*

In 1960, with a special recommendation from the Captain of HMS *Gambia*, John was posted to HMS *Dolphin*, the submarine training depot in Gosport. John at this stage was a Leading Hand and it was unusual for a Leading Hand to be allowed to join submarines, with the Captain's special recommendation seemingly making the difference.

Broken down into three phases, John spent Part One in 6 weeks of classroom instruction. Part two followed which was 'submarine escape' consisting of two successful ascents from a 100ft tank which took about 17/18seconds, breathing out throughout the ascent. To breathe in would have resulted in collapsed lungs. John remembers these ascents as being

'fun'. Having successfully completed Part One and Part Two, John was then formally called 'a submariner' and received the superior rate of pay due to all submariners.

### **HMS Acheron**

John's first submarine posting was to HMS *Acheron*, docked in Portsmouth having just been re-fitted. Here he commenced his Part Three training which was to learn his job and role on a submarine, to be then examined by the Engineering Officer and other Heads of Departments, culminating with a 'walk through' the boat, being tested by the 1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenant. He recalls that:

*"being on a submarine meant that you had to know everything about the workings of the submarine. You are a submariner first and (for example) a cook, mechanic etc. second. We were then formally awarded the title 'submariner' even though I still held the rank of Leading Hand"*.

HMS *Acheron* played an active role in the Cold War and John remembers *Acheron* tracking Soviet ships as well as submarines, the latter having very much a unique 'sound signature'. He also recalled the grim living conditions on board

*"We did not shower in submarines. There was only sufficient fresh water to shave, wash your face and clean teeth, as the fresh water was required for the main batteries, galley and engines. We didn't wash our clothes, and therefore stood in the same clothes and sweat throughout every voyage. Once we had dived and were below surface there were no hot meals because the galley was 'all-electric' and power was reserved as much as possible for the battery which powered the boat's propulsion. After a voyage the submarine berthed and a relief crew would come on board to relieve us. On one occasion we berthed in Rosyth but the relief crew refused to come on board, this meant that we had to set-off again and travelled south to Gosport where a relief crew did finally come on board to allow us 24hrs to go ashore to clean ourselves up"*.

Throughout his extensive career in submarines, John found that a remarkable *esprit de corps* existed which marked submariners out from other service personnel. Whilst outside of the submarine some crew members would not necessarily make good friends, but when on active service everyone got on, did their jobs to the best of their ability to ensure the safety of the vessel and there was very little discontent.

*Acheron* spent 15 months in Canada, training Canadian submariners and monitoring Soviet submarines. In later years, this posting to Canada led to some surprising reunions for John. One in 2008 took place in Alaska, when John met up with two Canadians who had served on *Acheron* and with whom he had kept in touch. The other an amazing coincidence took place around 15-18 yrs ago. Whilst providing his engineering expertise to the Aberystwyth Cliff Railway, John heard a visitor and his wife speaking with a Canadian accent. He and the Canadians got into a conversation and a few pleasantries, it then turned out that the Canadian had been the Medic on board the *Acheron* during John's operational tour with *Acheron* to Canada.

John then took the 'Fleet Board' and was posted to HMS *Sutton* at Dolphin to successfully complete a qualifying course and was promoted to Petty Officer.

### **HMS *Amphion***

*Amphion*, an 'A' Class submarine was a veteran of WW2 and John joined as 'Stoker Petty Officer' (SPO), whilst in Singapore and after eight months was sent to the UK to undertake the two year 'Mechanicians' course. On completion of the 'Mechanicians' course John was drafted into the Nuclear Submarine Course in HMS Sultan. The course consisted of Nuclear Physics, Water Chemistry and the engineering propulsion systems of a nuclear boat. The examinations were set and marked by the UK Atomic Energy Authority.

### **Nuclear Submarines**

#### **HMS *Warspite***

It was now 1967 and John was posted to one of the so-called '*sneaky boats*', HMS *Warspite*. The '*sneaky boats*' were nuclear submarines which had received special fittings to equip it for its monitoring of the activities of the Soviet submarine fleet. John recalled that the Soviet submarines were somewhat antiquated and crewed by conscripts but with very good captains.

Commissioned in April 1967, *Warspite* was the third of Britain's nuclear-powered submarines, and the second (and final) of the *Valiant* class. In October 1968, *Warspite* followed a Soviet boat identified as an Echo II-class submarine. *Warspite* collided with the stern and propellers of the Soviet boat. It was reported in the UK media that *Warspite* had collided with an iceberg! John remembers the incident well:

*"It was in the Baring Sea. There was a horrific collision and Warspite turned 67degrees. We did not know what had happened. We surfaced and found damaged hull casing and fin. The Soviet submarine had also surfaced and we just sat there, looking at each other. Quite a few of us were very shaken up by it".*

After inspecting the damage, *Warspite* made a surface passage to Loch Ewe where shipwrights were waiting to camouflage the damage then to Barrow for permanent repairs.

#### **HMS *Conqueror***

John left *Warspite* in 1969, being posted to the soon to be commissioned HMS *Conqueror* as Chief Petty Officer Mech 1<sup>st</sup> Class. He remembers going up to Cammell Laird in his home town of Birkenhead, to watch the submarine being built, and was a member of the crew which took her off for first sea trials and to Gibraltar from she was 'worked up' as was accepted into "The Fleet", in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Submarine Squadron, Faslane.

*Conqueror* was a British *Churchill*-class nuclear-powered fleet submarine which served in the Royal Navy from 1971 to 1990. She was the third submarine of her class, following the

earlier *Churchill* and *Courageous*, that were all designed to face the Soviet threat at sea. Each of the three submarines were 'special fit' boats. John recalled:

*"Most of the time we were engaged on very serious exercises. On one occasion a Russian submarine entered the mouth of the Clyde. We went out to head him off and he took to open sea. He then turned and carried out a 'Crazy Ivan' manoeuvre, which meant that he had turned around and was heading straight towards us at high speed. Our CO fired the 'active sonar' at him, the effect of which would have deafened the Russian crew, and he backed off".*

In 1976, John was promoted to 'Charge Chief Mech' which made him responsible for the nuclear propulsion system of the *Conqueror*. He was based for a while in Devonport running the submarine support maintenance unit for three conventional and two nuclear submarines (one of which was *Warspite*).

### **HMS *Swiftsure***

In 1978, John was posted to HMS *Swiftsure* to play a key role in the operation of the new 'S' Class submarine (one of 6 'S' boats which were all 'sneaky boats').

John spent the next 2.5yrs with *Swiftsure* and recalled one specific incident when *Swiftsure* set out to acquire the acoustic signature of the Soviet aircraft carrier *Kiev*. Upon locating a new unique acoustic sound which indicated the *Kiev's* presence *Swiftsure* hid underneath *Kiev* for several hours, with her raised periscope just 10 feet under the aircraft carrier's hull, allowing the crew to take photos and record the ship's acoustic signature. In doing so *Swiftsure* also discovered an enormous Soviet military exercise and reported back accordingly.

### **End of Service**

By the time he had turned 40yrs, John had over 22yrs of service. At that time, it was possible to sign on for further years so John signed on to 55yrs. His last posting was an instructor on nuclear engineering at HMS Sultan. However, a cancellation of government policy brought an end to that opportunity and aged 45yrs on 7.4.1984, John was discharged from the Royal Navy. He remembers the process of discharge being perfunctory, undertaken by a junior clerk, with not even a word of thanks given. Much later he received a letter of appreciation from an unknown civil servant in the MoD.

### **Civilian Life**

Leaving the Royal Navy, John worked for Crown House Engineering which had contracts with the NHS before becoming the 'Test Team Leader' at 'Sizewell B' nuclear power station in Suffolk, which he recalls as a very successful period. He also got called in to provide his expertise following the Pembroke Dock explosion of 1994.

John made his home in Aberystwyth in 1985. From 1996 he worked as a support worker at the Aberystwyth Day Centre (since closed by Ceredigion County Council), and in 1998 he

helped to restore and then ran the Funicular Cliff Railway located on Constitution Hill in Aberystwyth, before retiring in 2001. John is an active member of the Royal British Legion, the local veterans branch, and the Submariners Association with whom he is the Wales Branch Treasurer.

John has a daughter and son living in Wrexham and also a son in New Zealand.