

Career of Rear Admiral R L Alexander CB DSO DSC  
29 April 1913 – 24 April 1993

Robert Love Alexander was born in Linwood, Edinburgh on the 29<sup>th</sup> April 1913. He was the only child of Robert Love Alexander, a merchant navy officer and Jessie Macrae. As a little boy he loved *Winnie the Pooh* and called his mother after Eeyore which came out as 'Memor', a name which was used by her grandchildren. Until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the armed forces did not feature in his family; it was artists and doctors. His paternal grandfather was the artist Robert Alexander RSA (The Royal Scottish Academy) (1840-1923) his Uncle the Scottish watercolorist Edwin Alexander RSA (1870-1926) and another Uncle Martin (Marty) Alexander an accomplished sculptor. On his mother's side his grandfather, John Macrae, was the doctor in Laggan from 1870-1892.

With the outbreak of World War I, Robbie's father, also a member of the Royal Naval Reserve, commanded sloops (small destroyers), winning the Distinguished Service Order (DSO). His uncle, Kenneth Macrae enlisted as an army doctor and saw active service in all the fierce battles at the Somme, Gallipoli and earned a Military Cross (MC), for valour in April 1918 at Armentières, France in the battles of the German spring offensive. As a doctor, this was an exceptional achievement. Another uncle, Ian Macrae, served as an army doctor during the War, went on to become a Major General in the Indian Army and was captured in Malaya in 1942, spending 3½ years as a prisoner of war.

Born in 1913, Robbie's first memory of the War was the Zeppelin raids over Edinburgh. He attended (prep) school Merchiston Castle in Edinburgh. Here he was to meet his fellow submariner, Hugh Mackenzie, who was also to have a distinguished wartime career. Hugh eventually, as a vice admiral, was to become the 'father' of the Polaris Submarine programme.

Robbie joined Britannia Royal Naval College, Dartmouth in 1927 (Anson Term). Dartmouth was run on fairly disciplinarian public school lines, with both academic and naval studies. This lasted until 1930, when he joined the Battlecruiser HMS REPULSE as a cadet under training. Life again was extremely busy and included learning all aspects of the ship's operation, covering seamanship, supply and engineering. Promoted to Midshipman in 1931 (not yet a commissioned rank), he joined HMS KENT and saw service in the Far East. He was in Shanghai in 1933 when the Japanese were invading China and the International Naval forces (Britain, France and United States) were observing and not becoming involved. In his Midshipman's journals (beautifully illustrated) he describes a visit to the temples at Angkor-Vat in what is today modern day Cambodia.

Robbie left HMS KENT in 1933 and was promoted to Sub Lieutenant (first commissioned rank) and returned to the UK to undertake further professional training. He spent time at the Royal Naval College Greenwich where he said he got 2 out of 200 in a maths exam. That obviously didn't hold him back as a highly successful submarine commander, where he needed mathematical precision and great numeracy to be able to carry out an attack on an enemy ship.

In 1934, Robbie joined HMS DOLPHIN for submarine training and after completing this in April 1935 he joined HM Submarine SNAPPER. His commanding officer was the famous John 'Tubby' Linton, a larger than life character who was to win the Victoria Cross (posthumously) during operations in the Mediterranean in March 1943. Robbie had a picture of his hero, Tubby, over his bed for the rest of his life. SNAPPER was part of the British task force that stood by off the coast of Spain, during the Civil War, protecting the British fleet against fascist (Italian) submarines, which were supporting General Franco's Nationalists.

In 1937 he joined the submarine HMS URSULA as First Lieutenant (second in command), whose captain was George Phillips another much admired submariner. He was at sea in URSULA when war with Germany broke out in September 1939. He was then appointed as First Lieutenant of HM Submarine PERSEUS based in Hong Kong in June 1940. He returned to England and undertook the submarine command exam (known as the Perisher) and passed in September 1940. His first command was the WWI submarine H32, these old 'boats' (as submarines were known) were basically used for training and provided the first experience of command.

In July 1941, Robbie left Britain, leaving behind a young wife, Peggy, and two daughters aged 3 (Elisabeth) and 2 months (Jenifer), to take his new command, HMS PANDORA, to New London, in the United States, for a refit. This was a time for relaxation from the privations and tensions of war. The lights were on and unlike Britain, where rationing and the German bombing blitz were in full swing, America must have seemed like the Promised Land. His American hosts made sure he added dancing to his repertoire of skills! Whilst he was there, on the 7<sup>th</sup> December 1941, the Japanese attacked the US Fleet in Pearl Harbour and brought America into the war.

In January 1942, PANDORA completed her repairs and returned to Gibraltar via Bermuda and then conducted a (working up) patrol, off Alboran Island, just between the south of Spain (Almeria) and the Moroccan coast. After loading stores she was then sent to Malta, where the 10<sup>th</sup> Submarine Flotilla, was fighting a desperate action to try and disrupt the German and Italian convoys that were reinforcing General Rommel's Afrika Corps in North Africa. Malta was coming under sustained bombardment from the German and Italian air forces and submarines were being used to run supplies from Gibraltar to Malta. PANDORA slipped into Malta and was ordered to stay on the surface in the dockyard to unload her cargo. Usually when a raid came in the submarines would dive in the harbour, but this time the vital cargo had to be taken ashore, which would mean the submarine staying on the surface. Robbie went ashore to be briefed on his next patrol, leaving half the ship's company onboard. A raid came in, a direct hit down the conning tower sunk PANDORA and those onboard were killed. He arrived back to see half his young men floating down the harbour - this was to be a most cruel blow and caused him great sadness for the rest of his life. To make matters worse the remainder of the surviving ship's company, except for Robbie and three others (who were sent to Alexandria), were embarked on the submarine OLYMPUS to return to the UK. Just outside Malta, she hit a mine and all the surviving members of PANDORA's crew were lost. Robbie's trip to Alexandria was due to be taken in HM Submarine URGE. This was changed and URGE never returned from that patrol.

In Alexandria he took command of HMS PROTEUS, which was then deployed to Beirut. His personal possessions were sent ahead on the submarine depot ship HMS MEDWAY, she was torpedoed and his possessions were lost. PROTEUS carried out operations round the Greek islands landing agents, carrying out torpedo and surface gun actions. In October 1942 he returned to Britain for PROTEUS to undertake a refit. He was then appointed to command the brand new submarine TRUCULENT, which had just been built in Barrow in Furness. Working in northern waters, in June 1943, he sunk the German submarine U308. A successful attack by one submarine on another was at this time a rare occurrence and for this he was awarded the DSO on 10<sup>th</sup> August 1943.

In September 1943 TRUCULENT took part in Operation Source, the attack on the German battleship TIRPITZ, by the midget (X Craft), four man submarines. The object of the exercise was that these midget submarines should be towed to the entrance of Altafjord Norway, where the TIRPITZ was anchored in a heavily defended anchorage. The sheer sides of the Fiord made a low level attack by bombers difficult and the ship was surrounded by nets to stop submarines from

firing torpedoes into the battleship. TRUCULENT, along with other submarines was tasked with towing the midget submarines from Lerwick in the Shetland Isles to the entrance of the Fjord – an exceptionally difficult piece of seamanship. TRUCULENT was tasked with towing X6 (Lieutenant Donald Cameron) across the North Sea. Two of the six midget submarines were lost on passage. Of the remaining four, only X6 and X7 (Lieutenant Godfrey Plaice) managed to lay their mines, with delayed fuses, under the TIRPITZ and were captured and taken onboard the battleship. The explosions caused damage to the TIRPITZ, which put her out of action for six months. Cameron and Plaice were awarded Victoria Crosses and Robbie received a Mention in Despatches (28<sup>th</sup> December 1943) for his part in the operation.

TRUCULENT was then sent to the Far East to take part in the war against Japan. She was based in Trincomalee in Ceylon (modern day Sri Lanka). War patrols carried out included torpedo and gun actions and landing of Dutch agents on enemy held territory. These brave men, described by Robbie as the 'bravest of the brave', were almost all captured and subsequently executed by the Japanese. One amazing reunion happened over thirty years later, when Robbie and Peggy, who had been to see their daughter, Fiona, in Mexico were returning and transiting through Amsterdam Airport. There Robbie met up with one of the Dutch agents who he last saw leaving his submarine all those years before. For these war patrols Robbie was awarded the DSC (Distinguished Service Cross) on 19<sup>th</sup> September 1944.

TRUCULENT returned to Britain in November 1944, having been away for over a year. He was to meet up with his third daughter, Gillie, who he had barely seen since her birth in July 1943. From November '44 to May '45 Robbie had some well earned shore time with a staff appointment with the 3<sup>rd</sup> Submarine Flotilla, based in Blyth, Northumberland. In May 1945 with the war in Europe over, Robbie took command of the Submarine TUNA. He took her to Copenhagen in Denmark to become, in July, the first British submarine to visit since the end of the war in Europe. This was a goodwill visit which had a very sad aspect to it as an accident occurred during the celebration firework display killing many Danish civilians who had endured many years of German occupation. On a happier note he heard that his son, also to be called Robbie, was born on the 11<sup>th</sup> July, whilst he was in Copenhagen.

A sad postscript to TRUCULENT's life happened in January 1952, when sailing in the Thames near Sheerness, she collided with a Swedish oil tanker. There was a large loss of life (57 who escaped prematurely and were swept away in the strong current) and 15 survivors. Robbie and his wartime engineer, Bob Lane, were sent by the Flag Officer Submarines up to Chatham to provide assistance and in depth knowledge of the submarine. Alas it was to be a wasted visit.

After the war in October 1945 he became commanding officer of HMS ALDERNEY which was to be his last submarine command. A sister ship of ALDERNEY, HMS ALLIANCE, is on permanent display at the Submarine Museum in Gosport.

Between 1945 and 1950 Robbie, he was promoted to Commander in 1948 (aged 35), undertook a number of shore appointments in Bath and HMS DOLPHIN (Gosport).

In 1950 Britain was at war again in Korea in support of the United Nations defence of South Korea. Robbie was appointed as the second in command of the Light Fleet Aircraft Carrier, HMS GLORY. This was quite normal that an officer who had spent most of his career in submarines, on promotion would go to sea in a surface ship. This appointment included 18 months away from the UK with GLORY undertaking record breaking flying operations in Korea. Robbie twice had to assume command, when one captain had to be relieved after a nervous breakdown and the other fell down a gangway. Robbie was awarded a second Mention in Despatches (3<sup>rd</sup> October 1952).

Robbie was promoted to Captain on 31<sup>st</sup> December 1952 and again was appointed to a number of shore appointments and in 1956 took command of HMS SOLEBAY, a battle class destroyer and leader of the squadron which included HMS HOGUE and HMS LAGOS. Deployments included time in the Mediterranean including time off the Island of Cyprus, where Britain was trying to combat gun running by the Eoka terrorists, who were trying to violently end British rule in Cyprus and form a union with Greece. Professionally Robbie adored the opportunity of commanding a fast exciting warship. Again, like GLORY, a very different proposition to commanding a wartime submarine, but one that very much chimed with his love of action and speed. Whilst in command of SOLEBAY, in Malta, he was able to perform one last service for PANDORA and his men who died in her. She had been raised in 1943 and her hull beached. In June 1957, when she was being broken up, two skeletons were found in a small compartment, where they had lain for 15 years. Robbie read a prayer as the coffins of two former shipmates were committed to the deep from the gun platform of the submarine TUDOR at sea off Malta on July 1<sup>st</sup>.

In 1960 Robbie went back to Malta as Captain of HMS FORTH and the 1<sup>st</sup> Submarine Squadron and the 108<sup>th</sup> Minesweeping Squadron. Malta, during the early 60's, was an outpost which encapsulated the last days of Empire. Here, the Royal Navy sailed round the Mediterranean as if it was their private yachting lake. It was a fun time where everyone seemed to look bronzed and handsome. It provided a tonic to those in the Navy who had endured such a torrid time there in WWII.

In 1962 Robbie was promoted to Rear Admiral and posted to NATO headquarters at SHAPE near Paris. This was probably not the operational command he would have chosen, but he was picked for his ability to get on with colleagues across the NATO spectrum. He was able to deploy his charm and good manners to get the best out of those he had to work with despite language, political and cultural differences. It also saw the hottest period of the Cold War between the West and the Soviet Union, with the Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962.

Robbie retired from the Royal Navy in 1965 having been awarded the Companion of the Order of the Bath (CB), for long and distinguished service. To conclude, this is a quote from his obituary in the Daily Telegraph following his death on April 24<sup>th</sup> 1993, which neatly sums up his wartime career:

*Robbie Alexander was one of the most popular wartime submarine commanders. He took the trouble to get to know all his sailors, their wives, families and their problems. A bear of a man complete with whiskers, he prowled his control room during an attack as though considering whom to devour. But he had a light hearted manner and always a joke to reassure his attack team about the deadly consequences of what they are doing.*

And a postscript from Paddy (Rear Admiral JPB) O'Riorden

*Those of us who were there, will never forget the fun and games after Mess Dinners in FORTH, then later NARVIK, when, as CaptainSM, he used to carry out attacks as a U-Boat Captain on British Hospital ships...and the 'chorus' would be a group of us who became cylinders of the engines, bobbing up and down and going 'Woomphermater, Woomphermater'. It was only after these antics that he and Chimp Clayden (his Commander SM) would regale us with tales of what it was really like to be a submariner during WW2*

Like so many of his generation, Robbie was not comfortable in talking about his wartime exploits to his family and would not have really liked the modern 'hero' moniker that is attached to military veterans. Certain actions during the war caused him much pain in later life. However to his family and friends he was a wonderful father and grandfather who in his long marriage of 57 years to Peggy produced together footprints that will be remembered for many years to come.

A short version of Robbie's career history follows:

Robbie (Robert Love) Alexander entered the Royal Navy aged 13 at BRNC Dartmouth. Subsequently he joined submarine branch and served throughout WWII in operational submarines. Losses of British Submarines were in the region of 33%. Very few submariners serving at the outbreak of war survived for the duration.

1927	Joined BRNC Dartmouth – Anson Term
1930	HMS REPULSE (Battlecruiser) Cadet
1931	HMS KENT (County Class Cruiser) Midshipman
1935	Submarine Training
1935	HMS/M SNAPPER
1938	HMS/M URSULA
1939	HMS MEDWAY (Submarine Depot Ship)
1940	HMS/M PERSEUS
1940	HMS/M H32 In Command
1941	HMS/M PANDORA in Command (Sunk alongside Malta 1 April 1942)
1942	HMS/M PROTEUS in Command
1943	HMS/M TRUCULENT In Command. May 1943 DSO for successful attack on U308 off the Faroes. Mentioned in despatches for X Craft attack on the German Battleship Tripitz September 1943. 1944 awarded DSC for offensive operations in the Far East.
1944	HMS FORTH (Submarine Depot Ship)
1945	HMS/M TUNA in Command
1945	HMS/M ALDERNEY in Command
1946	Admiralty (Bath) Staff of Director of Naval Equipment
1948	Naval Staff Course
1948	Staff of Flag Officer Submarines
1950	HMS GLORY (Light Fleet Aircraft Carrier). Second in Command and temporary command during Captains' absences. Mentioned in Despatches for directing offensive flying operations in Korea
1952	Admiralty (London) Director Undersea Weapons
1954	Chief of Staff to Flag Officer Submarines
1956	HMS SOLEBAY (Battle Class Destroyer) In Command and Captain D First Destroyer Squadron
1959	Imperial Defence College Course
1960	HMS FORTH and later HMS NARVIK (In Command and Captain S/M 1 <sup>st</sup> Submarine Squadron and the 108 <sup>th</sup> Minesweeping Squadron)
1962	Promoted Rear Admiral. Appointed as Vice Naval Deputy to the Supreme Allied Commander Europe. First General Laurius Norstad then General Lyman Lemnitzer.
1964	Appointed Companion of the Order of the Bath (CB)
1965	Retired from the Royal Navy

**MEDALS** Companion of the Order of the Bath (CB)

Distinguished Service Order (DSO)  
Distinguished Service Cross (DSC)  
1939-1945 Star, Atlantic Star, Africa Star, Burma Star  
1939-45 Medal with Mention in Despatches  
Defence Medal 1939-45 and Pacific Star  
Korean War Medal with Mention in Despatches  
United Nations Korean War Medal  
Coronation (Queen Elizabeth II) Medal