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**WILLIAM BAILEY CBE, DSC, GM and Bar  
1918-1985- A TRIBUTE: Andrew Bailey**

William "Bill" Bailey was born in Santos-o-Velho, Lisbon, in 1918 in a house which today is the home of the Entidade Legalizadora para a Comunicação Social. It is a large yellow building on the western side of Largo de Santos and at the time overlooked the Lisbon Electric Tramways (LET) power station on the riverside (Later to become a Lisnave workshop), where his father John T. Bailey, a mechanical engineer, worked to ensure that Lisbon was never short of power. John T. Bailey was recruited by the LET in 1914 and came to Lisbon where he met and married Nellie King in 1915. Her father, William Duff King, a naval architect, hailed from Greenock on the Clyde and was invited by the King D.Luís I to oversee the smooth running and maintenance of Portuguese flagged vessels, mostly built on the Clyde, plying their trade between Lisbon and the Portuguese colonies in the late nineteenth century. They lived in a house which was shared with another family and overlooked the Tagus. It was later to become an annexe of York House and today the Hotel das Janelas Verdes.

The sea, the Navy and engineering featured strongly in Bill Bailey's family, a course he came to follow after schooling by Miss Phillimore as a boarder at Oporto British School (OBS) under Canon d'Álbertanson and later Highgate School in north London. After qualifying as an electrical engineer at Faraday House Electrical Engineering College, London, in 1940 he immediately joined the Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve (RNVR), aged 22, and was sent to HMS Vernon for training at the school of torpedoes and mines.

At his interview for the RNVR by a board of senior captains and commanders William Bailey was asked what he noticed on entering the room. He replied 'the amount of gold braid at the table, sir'; this raised a chuckle from the seniors, and he was then asked if he had noticed any decoration on the wall behind him as he entered the room. Looking ahead he noticed some shelves with bric-a-brac and assuming the wall behind would be similar replied accordingly. The interviewing officer asked him to turn round: the wall was bare. Clearly the RNVR was looking for officers with imagination since he was accepted as Temporary Electrical Sub-Lieutenant.

After training at HMS Vernon in mines, he was given command of an armed trawler HMS Prospects Ahead which together with other trawlers carried out minesweeping duties between the NE coast of Scotland, Orkney and Shetland. His crew were mostly seasoned fishermen and seemed to smell their way around their home waters finding, and destroying, German mines laid to cripple and sink Allied shipping.

On one occasion they were a sitting target for a Luftwaffe Stuka dive bomber which strafed and missed on its first attack. The second approach came with the usual fearful screaming as the Stuka dived, but failed to drop a bomb or fire a shot, the pilot waving as he headed home: a lucky day for HMS Prospects Ahead and her crew.

In the early part of the war the Luftwaffe were dropping mines by parachute on land targets and estuaries which placed additional strain on the Naval Render Mines Safe Officers (RMSO), some of whom were formed into the Land Incident Unit (September 1940), which when on standby could be

rushed to any part of the country to deal with the unexploded menace. There was a period when one in fourteen mines was ingeniously booby-trapped, so vastly increasing the risks facing the officers engaged in rendering them safe. Bill Bailey, part of this section, rendered safe his first such magnetic mine on 13th September 1940 near Spurn Head on the Humber.

This specially selected and trained team of naval officers were all volunteers, young, single and having no doubts of the dangers involved.

A break came when an RN armed steam trawler in Ponta Delgada, Azores, required a Commanding Officer to return the vessel to the UK. Bill Bailey was given this task and having been flown to Ponta Delgada joined the vessel which was duly bunkered and then set sail with instructions to show no lights at night for fear of attracting the attention of German U-boats. The coal dust loaded in the Azores was, as is custom, sold by weight but had been contaminated with excessive moisture. The result was that at night the sparks coming out of the funnel were more like Blackpool Illuminations so all navigational lights were shown on the pretext of being a neutral fishing vessel. They arrived safely in the UK, but with no thanks to the supplier of adulterated coal dust.

In September 1941 Bill Bailey was trained as a helmeted diver at HMS Maidstone to work at depths up to 20 fathoms or 120 feet. He was promptly sent to Gibraltar as Senior Diving Officer, Render Mines Safe Officer (RMSO) where Italian frogmen saboteurs were attaching mines to Allied ships which would either suffer damage and sink in Gibraltar or shortly after sailing.

Bill Bailey called for volunteers to be trained in shallow water diving and built up the nucleus of an Underwater Working Party (UWP) with three NCOs.

Divers were taught to rigorously maintain their own equipment and wore weighted plimsolls to remain upright while diving. By contrast the Italian frogmen used specially designed breathing apparatus, rubber suits and flippers. Many Allied ships were being lost at sea shortly after visiting Gibraltar and it was presumed at the time that they had fallen prey to German U-boats, until it was discovered that the daring Italian frogmen were operating from Spain and just over the frontier from Gibraltar.

On the 18 December 1941 Italian frogmen attacked and seriously damaged the battleships HMS Queen Elizabeth and HMS Valiant with mines in Alexandria harbour; they now had turned their attention to targets in Gibraltar.

While the British divers searched Allied vessels for mines mostly during the day, the Italians operated under the cover of darkness using two-man human torpedoes. The Italian frogmen, riding their human torpedo 'Maiale' would approach their targets with their heads just above the surface and dive to attach their warhead to the vessel's bilge keel or fix smaller limpet mines, secured by magnets to the hull. The warhead was usually set to explode within two and a half hours. They would then return to their base on their human torpedo, less warhead, to prepare for the next operation.

British defence against the Italians' nocturnal activities was to drop depth charges at irregular intervals and use searchlights to deter any incursion into the areas where Allied ships were

anchored: this met with some success. On the 7<sup>th</sup> December 1942, on a cold night, an attack on Allied shipping by six Italian frogmen on three human torpedoes resulted in three killed and captured while the sixth Italian was able to return to base.

Bill Bailey was then called by the Defence Security Officer, Colonel Medlam, to comment on some information received by a Spanish agent that might lead to the discovery of where the Italians were operating from on the Spanish side between La Linea and Algeciras. It was agreed that he would meet the Spanish agent in La Linea in a covert reconnaissance operation to establish the possible location of the Italian base. The Spanish agent led him to various places in and around La Linea including a military barracks which they entered illegally and narrowly escaped detection. There were containers in the barracks that the agent believed might have held components that made up the human torpedoes. On his return to Gibraltar, Bill Bailey reported on his visit to La Linea saying that no evidence existed as to the location of the Italian base and that he suspected the agent of being a double agent. This latter point was refuted by the Senior Intelligence Officer at the time but later proved to be correct.

It was later discovered that the Italian 4,900-ton tanker *Oltorra*, berthed in Algeciras under the guise of Spanish neutrality, was the well-prepared base for the Italian frogmen. The Italians transported ammunition, diving equipment and supplies to the ship which had been prepared with a four-foot escape hatch cut into the side of the ship just below the water-line, allowing their human torpedoes or charioteers to move freely towards their prospective targets which were plainly visible on the surface and in close proximity.

The Olterra was manned by relaxed Italian seamen during the day who at night donned their diving gear and mined Allied ships.

In Gibraltar the UWP were very hard pressed, even with freshly trained divers, to meet the demands of searching all Allied vessels anchored in the Bay for mines.

'One notable experience Bailey had had was a fight under water with an Italian frogman. He found his enemy fixing a limpet mine to the hull of a ship at anchor. Both drew their knives, but Bailey managed to strike first and slit his adversary's air pipe. With his flippers, the Italian was able to swim faster than Bailey and got away. But not for long. He was found floating unconscious on the surface of the water and died soon afterwards.' (J. Grosvenor and L. M. Bates: Open the Ports) This incident was to give Bill Bailey nightmares for the rest of his life.

Diving operations continued in Gibraltar as the Italians became bolder and more ingenious mines were being used including units from Germany. One such device was found attached to a vessel and rendered safe under water by Bill Bailey. Being the first of a kind it was handed over to the naval scientists ashore for examination. The following day Bailey was called for by a very white-faced and shaken scientist who advised him that of the three essential mechanisms primed to fire the mine, two had been successfully dealt with, but the third had failed to fire owing to a grain of sand keeping essential contacts apart and hence saved from oblivion.

**On 4 July 1943** a Liberator carrying General Sikorski, his daughter, several military officials and service colleagues **crashed into the sea** on take-off from Gibraltar shortly after

11.00 pm. General Sikorski was the Commander-in-Chief of Poland and Prime Minister of the Polish Government in Exile; he and all other occupants perished in the accident except the Czech pilot Edvard Prchal who was rescued by an RAF launch. The aircraft was on its way to London from the Middle East. Bill Bailey was called to dive at first light together with four or five other divers, and recover all bodies and important documentation contained in General Sikorski's briefcase of which there were no copies. General Sikorski's daughter's body was never found. The aircraft controls were removed for the Air Ministry's Accident Investigation Board to examine without altering the final position of the levers. It was clearly a gruesome job for all the divers to recover seriously damaged and mutilated bodies from the murky waters polluted with aircraft fuel. Accusations of sabotage were made and that the Liberator's controls had been tampered with. However, the Court of Enquiry ruled accident with no blame being placed on the pilot.

Shortly after this Bill Bailey broke his ankle accidentally on a flight of stairs and handed over command of the UWP to Lieutenant Lionel Crabb before returning to England.

As a result of the measures taken to protect Allied shipping anchored at Gibraltar in 1941 the number of ships sunk or crippled diminished considerably; nevertheless the Italians continued their attacks and remained a very serious threat.

As plans for D-Day were being put together the Royal Navy worked hard on the development of improved diving suits, breathing mixtures suitable for divers to work freely at depths of 120 feet and called for volunteers for 'Special Service in Hazardous Operations'. The RN pursuit of a balanced breathing mixture of oxygen and nitrogen for divers operating at vari-

ous depths involved placing the diver with his breathing gear in a tank where the top was then sealed and pressure applied (known as the 'wet pot') to simulate increasing depths. The diver was asked to hammer on the side of the tank at regular intervals to prove he was conscious. When a diver lost consciousness he was immediately removed from the pressure chamber and revived with oxygen. This happened on many occasions to the unfortunate volunteers, including Bill Bailey who described it as a 'chilling experience, not recommended for one's health!'

The Normandy landing was approaching and experience in the North Africa campaign had revealed that German thoroughness extended to the sabotage of ports and dock installations before surrendering them.

Bill Bailey was given command of Naval Party 1574 which comprised initially six divers (later eight), their D-Day objective being to clear the harbour basin at Ouistreham and ensure operation of the lock gates that gave access to the Caen canal (10 km) which had to be cleared to provide safe passage for supply vessels to reach Caen.

Training of divers was kept at a brisk pace to ensure total readiness for the D-Day landing on the 6th June 1944 of 133,000 Allied troops on the Normandy beaches from the east side of the Contentin Peninsula to the mouth of the River Orne below Caen. A further 23,000 men parachuted and landed by glider to secure the flanks of the invading force.

Shortly after Caen had fallen to Canadian and British forces, a month after D-Day, Bill Bailey was approached by an army officer whose soldiers had found a large safe in what was left of

the Town Hall. The safe had to be opened in case it contained German military plans or documents of importance. Bailey said that it could be blown open and the safe was duly placed in the town square, explosives attached and then covered with sandbags and debris, of which there was no shortage after the heavy bombardment. The charge was fired with a loud explosion only to reveal that there was little left of the safe let alone any contents, leaving Bailey having to report to the senior army officer that the safe was empty! Bill Bailey was clearly as generous with his explosives as he was to those who knew him well.

As the Allied troops advanced, 'P' Party 1574 was sent to Boulogne and then Calais to carry out their hazardous duties. Further advances took them to Le Havre, Flushing, Breskens, Antwerp, Bremen and Hamburg. The last three ports were cleared of bombs, mines and booby traps by all four 'P' Parties who had met there and worked in unison. At the time Antwerp was the third largest port in the world, with thirty miles of wharves and many miles of river quays. It is important to relate that from this specialist group of four 'P' Parties comprising no more than forty bomb and mine disposal divers, only one man was killed.

Much credit to the 'P' Parties' success must go to the thorough training in both diving and mine disposal techniques which prepared these 'human minesweepers' daily, and for long periods at a stretch, to dive often in nil visibility, identify and while under water render safe mines and booby traps. Divers risked a filthy death in the mud and slime as they worked by touch at the bottom of captured ports and harbours in order that the transports and supply ships, so necessary for the advancing troops, could berth in safety. The mission to clear all ports from Cherbourg to Hamburg and open them to shipping was com-

plete by March 1946.

'P' Parties then all returned to their base HMS Vernon (Diving) at Brixham, where many including Bill Bailey trained divers, many of them Dutch, for operations in the Far East after VJ Day in August 1945.

The last signal received in HMS Vernon (D), located at Brixham, came from the First Lord of the Admiralty and read as follows:

"On closing down your establishment at Brixham, I should like to express to you and your staff my admiration of the splendid work done by "P" Parties. The ingenuity shown and the courage displayed has contributed materially to the success of the operations of the United Nations."

In addition to his being awarded the George Medal for his work at Gibraltar, Bill Bailey was awarded the DSC for his work in connection with the Normandy landings and a Bar to his GM (of which twenty were awarded during the Second World War) for mine recovery work in France and the Low Countries. He was promoted to Lieutenant-Commander RNVR in March 1945 at the age of twenty-six, an exception since this level of promotion at the time rarely took place before the age of thirty.

In November 1945 Bill Bailey married Joan Mary Gordard in London, where she worked under the Ministry for Aircraft Production on components for Lancaster bombers. Shortly before they married when in a restaurant in London a curious story was to unfold. Two uniformed RAF officers at the bar seemed to be paying more than normal interest in Bill Bailey, to the point that he approached the officers and introduced him-

self. It turned out that they all knew each other. The pilots had been shot down and interned in occupied Holland. They escaped with a Dutch pilot and followed the escapees' route via safe houses, through France, over the Pyrenees to Barcelona and finally arrived at Gibraltar to await repatriation to England. While in Gibraltar the three escapee pilots were accommodated in Bill Bailey's quarters. The two RAF pilots explained about their safe return to their squadrons and expressed their gratitude for Bailey's hospitality. On enquiring of the Dutch pilot, Bailey was told that he had been shot. On arrival in England suspicion surrounded the Dutchman and it emerged that he had been a 'quisling' and planted by the Nazis in the internment camp to discover the escape route used by the Allies. Before leaving Gibraltar the Dutchman, in appreciation of Bailey having provided accommodation, offered him his knife that he claimed had secured his release from the POW camp in Holland, a gesture which Bailey refused to accept, suggesting he keep the knife for his son one day.

Bill Bailey had twin sisters, Elizabeth (Betty) and Anne (Nancy), who were a year older and both married in London in 1943. Betty married Charles Schatz, a British national who ran a clock factory in the Black Forest in Germany. This had been started by his father, Charles Schatz, who after education in England returned to Germany before the War but was soon back in England as the situation deteriorated. The clock factory was commandeered to become part of Germany's war machine making all types of timing devices, and by a curious twist of fate, clocks and timers for mines and bombs.

Bill Bailey returned to Portugal in 1949 aged 31 as Assistant Representative for the Metropolitan Vickers Export Co in the Iberian Peninsula. He had not been long in Lisbon when he

was summoned by the Portuguese Army to present himself for military service and to undergo a medical. Having suffered and survived underwater explosions he had been discharged from the Royal Navy in 1947 with a 40 per cent disability, duodenal ulcer and nerve deafness, which papers persuaded the Portuguese army officer that he was unfit for service in the army.

In the early 1950s Bill Bailey was contacted by an Italian who wished to meet him in Lisbon. The meeting took place in the Aviz Hotel restaurant, the Italian being the best friend of the Italian diver whose life was taken by Bill Bailey in 1942. He was also a frogman in Gibraltar at the time and wished to know exactly what had happened on that fateful day. The two one-time enemies exchanged experiences of their times in Gibraltar, each with enormous respect for the other's activities.

Bill Bailey, like so many who had faced the horrors of war, was extremely reluctant to talk of his personal experiences, other than those of a lighter nature. On a number of occasions he was asked to write a book or at least record in some way his wartime experiences. He never did, but if he were alive today I hope he would not be disappointed at my respectful compilation of anecdotes, some comical, others ironical. He looked on himself as a very lucky survivor; the real heroes, he believed, were those whose story often went untold and had made the ultimate sacrifice with their lives- just one young man, like so many, making his contribution to the collective war effort in search of peace and a free world.

Bill Bailey died in Lisbon in 1985 aged 66 after a successful business career in Portugal. His obituary in The Times of London, written by Sir John Colville, wartime Private Secretary to Sir Winston Churchill, read as follows:

'Few men have equalled the exceptional gallantry of William Bailey, CBE, DSC, GM and Bar, formerly Lieutenant Commander, RNVR, who died in Lisbon on March 11. He was a leading member of the British community in Portugal, bilingual in English and Portuguese. As a qualified engineer, he represented Metropolitan Vickers during their construction of three major hydroelectric power stations, and later he was managing director of the British-owned company, Caima Pulp Co, which produces and exports pulp made from eucalyptus trees. He was twice chairman of the British Chamber of Commerce. Such was his modesty that only under pressure would he admit to his notable exploits in the war. In 1941, as a naval frogman, he fought and vanquished a hostile intruder at Gibraltar. For this he was awarded the George Medal to which he received the rare distinction of a Bar for a further act of gallantry in 1944. He was also one of those who dived to salvage the bodies and the evidence from the wreck of the aircraft in which General Sikorski was killed. In addition to these two outstanding decorations, he was awarded the DSC, and in 1982, in recognition of lifelong service to the British community in Lisbon, he was created CBE. British colonies abroad have always sought to nerve both their own and their adopted countries: Bill Bailey was a glowing example of this tradition'.