

Local History County Yarns

David Arnold would like to hear from readers of *County Yarns* who have stories and illustrations about Sussex to share with us. Email david.arnold@me.com or write to him at 14 St John Street, Lewes, East Sussex BN7 2QE.

Three Lewes schoolboys who paid ultimate wartime price

Today (Friday 7th December) is the 77th anniversary of the Japanese attack on the US Pacific Fleet base of Pearl Harbor in the Hawaiian Islands.

Despite inflicting massive losses of men and warships the infamous surprise assault failed to achieve its major objective - the destruction of the American aircraft carriers. These were fortuitously at sea at the time and their preservation was to prove the US Navy's salvation.

Just six months later, at the Battle of Midway, aircraft flying from those same US carriers inflicted a crippling defeat upon the Japanese, dealing them a blow from which they never recovered. Even so, in the three years between Pearl Harbor and the nuclear bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the war against Japan was a relentlessly cruel struggle.

This week I touch upon the story of three Sussex men - all former pupils of Lewes County Grammar School for Boys - who lost their lives in World War II in actions that have links to Japan.

Walter Raymond Beck was at the school from 1930 until 1934. He lived on the Nevill Estate in Lewes and joined the Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve. He was one of the crew of a launch that helped rescue British troops from Dunkirk in May and June 1940.

Nine months later he was serving on the merchantman "SS Britannia" in the South Atlantic off Sierra Leone, en route to Bombay. On 25th March the ship was intercepted by the German surface raider, "Thor", whose gunfire sank the vessel.

Most of the crew, including Walter, got into the ship's lifeboats. "Thor" did not stop to pick up survivors and it was very sad that Walter, having survived the sinking, should succumb to exposure on 7th April when aged 23.

"Thor" would not normally abandon survivors of ships it sank. In the case of "Britannia" the German captain believed that British warships had been alerted and were hurrying to the scene and would therefore pick up the crew and survivors whilst the "Thor" made good her escape. Alas, it was not the case; of the 520 British seamen who took to the boats, 331 were eventually picked up or made landfall on Brazil, some 1,500 miles west.

"Thor" met her own doom in Yokohama harbour, Japan, on 30th November 1942. Having released into Japanese custody her Allied captives, she was tied up alongside a German tanker called the "Uckermark". This vessel's previous incarnation had been as the "Altmark". This same ship had been anchored in neutral Norwegian



waters when it was stormed and boarded by sailors from "HMS Cossack" in February 1940. With the famous cry, "The Navy's here!" they released 299 prisoners who'd been transferred to the "Altmark" from the pocket battleship "Graf Spee".

A cleaning operation in the tanks of the "Uckermark" sparked a huge explosion that sank four Axis ships including "Thor". Thirteen of her crew perished.

Harry Edwin Blackman also joined the Grammar School in 1930. He enlisted in the East Surrey Regiment and in 1938 was posted to the British International Settlement in Shanghai. When Japan entered the war he was in Malaya. The East Surreys sustained horrific casualties in the bloody campaign that ended with the British surrender at Singapore in February 1942.

Taken prisoner, Harry was forced to work as a slave labourer on the Siam to Burma "Death Railway", infamous for the Bridge on the River Kwai. In September 1944 Harry was ordered to join his fellow prisoners in being taken to Japan aboard the Japanese transport, "Kachidoki Maru".

When Harry's ship departed Singapore she was carrying some 900 British POWs. She carried no markings to indicate her human cargo. At 5am on 12th September 1944 the "USS Sealion II" slammed a torpedo into the "Rakuyo Maru" resulting in the drowning of 1,051 prisoners. That night at 11.45pm, "USS Pampanito" put a torpedo into the "Kachidoki Maru". Just 60 British and

Above: Some of the "Little Ships" at Dunkirk in 1940. Former Lewes schoolboy Raymond Beck manned a vessel similar to these and helped evacuate beleaguered British soldiers. Within a year Beck was lost at sea when his merchant ship was torpedoed.

Below: Another former Grammar schoolboy, John Winton, served behind Japanese lines with the famous Chindits in Burma. He was killed in April 1944 just after receiving a commission for conspicuous "gallantry in action". The photograph shows Chindits crossing a river with (inset) post-war Chindit regalia.

92 Australian servicemen survived. Harry Blackman was not amongst them.

John Keats Winton seems to have cut a fine figure as a youth being described in the Grammar School magazine, "The Barbican" as having a "... handsome presence. He captained his Form and was always the dominating figure in games on the football field."

He served initially as a Sergeant with the 1st Battalion of the South Staffordshire Regiment in the Far East and was one of the famous Chindits who flew behind enemy lines to take the fight to the Japanese in Burma.

John Winton was awarded an immediate commission for "gallantry in action". A few days later on 4th

April 1944 he was killed. In an account published in "The Barbican" his Colonel wrote: "Before his death he performed many acts of bravery and gave fearless exhibitions of gallantry in carrying out some of the hardest tasks given to an NCO. I feel sure you will treasure his memory as a great boy who had the makings of a great leader in battle."

All three stories above feature in my book, "The Fifty Five: A Story Set in Stone" that celebrates the Lewes Priory Memorial Chapel in Mountfield Road, Lewes. Copies of the hardback publication can be viewed at Skylark Books in the Needlemakers, Lewes. Purchase price of £18 includes a free copy of my earlier World War II experience book, "Seventy Years On".

