

TOMMY BROWN, George Medal.

You may not have heard of Tommy Brown, because details of his bravery during WWII were suppressed by the Establishment for reasons of national security for 58 years until the Millennium.

Between 1940 and 1942, Britain was in dire straits. We were losing the war! Our only hope of salvation was a miracle. All oil and much of our food was imported, brought to these shores by merchant seamen, but over half these ships travelling in convoy were being sunk by marauding packs of German U-boats lurking undetected in the Atlantic Ocean and beyond. Locating these submarines was like searching for a needle in a haystack. We had no idea where to look for them.

These enemy subs received their orders via what was known as 'Enigma' cipher machines, which in essence were glorified electronic typewriters fitted with three rotors which scrambled their messages. The only way to intercept Nazi communications to their U-boat commanders was by getting hold of a cipher machine and a list of codes which changed daily. However, by 1942 as code-breakers at Bletchley Park were getting to grips with the three-rotor machines, a fourth rotor was added, which increased the number of options to one hundred and sixty million, million, million different combinations. It was like trying to disentangle knots in a ball of wool the size of the universe. Without the capture of a four-rotor cipher machine and the necessary instructional data, Britain would have been starved into submission.

America had only recently entered the war, and as their troopships would soon be crossing the Atlantic ferrying huge numbers of US soldiers in readiness for D-Day, half would never have survived the crossing. It was absolutely imperative, whatever the cost, that we obtained a new four-rotor machine and directories without delay.

Tommy Brown, a Geordie lad from North Shields, was unable to find work in the North-East on leaving school in 1940 at the tender age of 14, so moved to Earl Shilton where he found work with Abbotts' shoe factory in New Street. He stayed for two years with his aunt & uncle at 'Sunnydene', 42 Station Road. Then, following his 16th birthday, Tommy volunteered for the Royal Navy, but was rejected on account of his age, and so he falsified his date of birth and became a NAAFI canteen assistant aboard HMS *Petard*, a brand new destroyer on its maiden voyage, and on 30 October 1942, was engaged in the hunt for a German U-boat in the Mediterranean Sea off Port Said. Eventually, *U-559* surfaced beside the *Petard* after being holed by 'depth charges', but before the crew surrendered they opened the sea cocks to flood the vessel. Lieutenant Anthony Fasson (29) from Jedburgh and Able Seaman Collin Grazier (22) from Tamworth stripped naked and entered the German sub to search for the four-rotor Enigma cipher machine and instructional data, which was vital to the code-breakers at Bletchley Park. Only by obtaining this equipment could Britain survive.

Tommy Brown also stripped off and joined Fasson and Grazier of his own accord, and it was Tommy who swam back and forth from the submarine to *Petard's* 'whaler' with the vital items Fasson and Grazier had rescued, but eventually the sub sank like a stone taking Fasson and Grazier to a watery grave. Brown managed to escape from the conning tower just in time. The two mariners who drowned were awarded posthumous George Crosses, while Brown, who was in fact a civilian, was awarded a George Medal. When his award was being prepared his true age of 16 years emerged and was ordered home, but returned to *Petard* in 1944 and promoted to senior canteen assistant. Early in 1945 he was posted to HMS *Belfast* which was undergoing a refit at Tynemouth, but had permission to sleep at his mother's home nearby. In the early hours of 13 February 1945 a discarded cigarette set fire to the flat where he, his mother and nine of his eleven siblings were sleeping. All escaped except Tommy and the four-year-old sister Maureen he had attempted to save. Tommy was just 19.

In 1945 following the end of WWII, Tommy's mother received her son's George Medal at Buckingham Palace, unaware that her late son's bravery had changed the course of the Second World War, and not until the Millennium was the bravery of Brown, Fasson and Grazier acknowledged when details were released from the 'Official Secrets Act'.

Tony Fasson is remembered in Jedburgh and Collin Grazier in Tamworth, and due to Leicester City Council seeking nominations for their 'Green Plaque Award' scheme, I nominated Tommy Brown who has been chosen as one of the twelve shortlisted, from which, the public will vote for the six finalists. How fitting it would be to honour a selfless young teenager whose courageous efforts, along with those of Fasson and Grazier, saved Britain and the free world from tyranny in our darkest hour. I consider Tommy Brown to be a worthy candidate, and if successful, the Green Plaque will take pride of place in front of Sunnydene in Station Road, Earl Shilton as a tribute to a self-sacrificing lad who always put others ahead of his own safety. If you are in agreement and wish to support my nomination *please go to...* www.leicestershire.gov.uk/greenplaques and register your vote before midnight on 31st July 2017. Thanking you in anticipation. John Reed.



Tommy (far left) at Sunnydene 1940



Colin Grazier Memorial, Tamworth.