

KEVIN WALTON AND A LIFE OF ADVENTURE

Status, Lieutenant, Royal Navy. Member of “Operation Tabarin”, the forerunner of the Falkland Islands Dependencies Survey which was the Government funded post-war initiative to explore the Antarctic Peninsula.

Born on May 15th 1918 in Hiroshima, Japan.

Biography.

Kevin is the son of Myra (Hebbert) and Murray Walton. Murray was a missionary in Japan, hence Kevin’s unusual birthplace. Kevin lived a few years in Japan before coming back to UK to spend 4 years being brought up by a great aunt and uncle while his parents returned to Japan. Most of his education was at Monkton Combe school in Bath – this was not altogether a happy experience for a bright and practical lad who was not afraid to admit that he wanted to learn.

It was in his teens, while on a family holiday in the Lake District, that Kevin met Howard Somervell (Everest 1922,24) who was to introduce him to mountains and mountaineering.

After school, Kevin attended City and Guilds College of Engineering (part of Imperial College) in South Kensington. He graduated in 1939 with a degree in Civil Engineering and also accumulated considerable experience in the sport of roof-climbing around college!

The War started soon after graduation – Kevin joined the Navy as an engineer officer. He started the war with a year in Tyneside assisting with the commissioning of new ships. The rest of his wartime naval career was varied and included a spell on the Battleship HMS Rodney during the hunt for and sinking of the Bismarck. He also served in HMS Onslow as part of the Russian Arctic convoy operation and under his captain Rupert Sherbrooke VC was at the centre of the Battle of the Barents Sea, an action where several British Destroyers fought off a far heavier enemy force and saved most of the convoy. Kevin was awarded the DSC for his bravery during fire-fighting operations during the battle. He then went on to serve in the Mediterranean and Far East in destroyers Duncan and Petard.

Kevin was returning from the Far East in 1945 when a telegraph arrived on the ship inviting him to be part of Operation Tabarin. He arrived back in the UK within 48 hours of receiving the telegram and then had only 10 days to prepare and pack for another 2 year absence. The full story of this 2 years in Antarctica has already been told in Kevin’s book of the same name. It was during this antarctic sojourn that an incident occurred that later resulted in Kevin being awarded an Albert Medal (later converted to a George Cross). Much of his time down South was spent training and working with Huskies which the British had shipped down from Greenland at the same time. These were the first generation of 50 years of British operated huskies in Antarctica. The full tale of this 50 years of work with huskies is well told in the book “Of Dogs and Men” partly written by Kevin.

On his return from Antarctica, Kevin married Ruth Yule – in due course producing 4 children, Jonathan Jane & Myra (twins) and Sarah.

Kevin's life for several years after getting married was varied to say the least. It included being the British secretary of an International Antarctic Expedition (which included keeping, and breeding huskies in the gardens of the Royal Geographical Society); acting as mechanic for a privately owned Aston Martin which entered – and completed – the Le Mans 24hour race; spending 7 months on South Georgia as second-in-command of the first year of the South Georgia Survey project, led by Duncan Carse; Repairing climbing boots at the world renowned alpine bootmaker, Robert Lawrie and being employed by the fledgling Outward Bound organisation as an instructor for their very first ever course at Eskdale in Cumbria. Not least of his exploits involved working in the Mediterranean for the British Secret Service as the engineer of a small but powerful vessel landing agents in Albania.

In 1952 Kevin was employed at Oundle school as Head of Workshops – this period included repairing several clocks at local churches, restoring a vintage Rolls Royce and starting the first “Arduous Training” courses which involved winter trips in the Scottish Mountains. There then followed 2 years in Northumberland working for consulting engineers “Merz & McLennan” who were involved with the fledgling Nuclear Power industry. This led to 5 years living in North Wales near Dolgellau where his children attended the local schools and rapidly learnt Welsh while he stayed throughout the construction of Trawsfynydd Nuclear Power Station. Leave during this period was not plentiful but summer holidays often involved Kevin, Ruth, 4 children and “Sister” the pet husky, trekking to the Northwest of Scotland in their 1927 Rolls-Royce, towing a trailer with all the camping gear! On many occasions hitch-hikers were astonished when this convoy stopped to squeeze an extra passenger in. Jonathan commented “We thought this was normal!” When the Nuclear project was completed the family moved to Dartmouth where Kevin's experience made him an ideal candidate as a lecturer in Mechanics at Britannia Royal Naval College. It was this period that started his passion for offshore sailing. Kevin then moved to Malvern College where a more conventional teaching role soon changed to him starting the “Opening Windows on Engineering” scheme. This scheme facilitated bright young engineers (of all branches of Engineering) to go into schools all over the UK in order to enthuse about the interesting jobs they were doing, hoping in turn to kindle a spark of enthusiasm in 14 year olds' imaginations as to the limitless boundaries of the “Engineering” profession. This was a direct response to the lack of high quality entries into the profession in the early 70's. The scheme was singularly successful and was specifically commended by the Finneston Commission's report into the status of Engineering in the late 70's For this work he was awarded the Fellowship of the City and Guilds Institute as well as the Queen's Silver Jubilee medal in 1977. Kevin and Ruth have continued to live high on the west side of the Malvern Hills to the present day.

Kevin has not had a quiet retirement. His love for offshore sailing led to the foundation of the Penguin Cruising Club in 1972. This club is still very active although Kevin finally hung up his oilskins a month short of his 85th birthday! The club has in 35 years introduced several thousand of people to the joys (and occasional trials!) of offshore sailing, particularly in the West of Scotland.

It is perhaps “Penguin Cruising” that typifies Kevin’s life of service to the community. While it has given him (and all his 4 children and many nephews and nieces) great enjoyment over the years it has involved him and Ruth in endless days of preparations and worries, especially in the early days of the club when costs were kept to the absolute minimum. His rewards lay only in knowing that his efforts had helped “open windows” to many others who had never considered that offshore sailing was possible to them. His enthusiasm and zest for life has affected many others who have thus benefited immeasurably.

Kevin is the first to state that “people are what is important in my life”. Their house is called “Fossil Bluff, named after son Jonathan’s base in the Antarctic (Kevin and Jonathan are believed to be the only father and son to hold the coveted “Polar Medal”) and which was designed and constructed by friends and family. It is full of artefacts from around the world many of which involve their family which now include 11 grandchildren who have inherited their grandparents love of travel but who always look forward to coming back to UK to see their “Grannie and Mumpa”.

Kevin Walton and the Albert Medal (George Cross)

Kevin was awarded the Albert Medal for a crevasse rescue in Antarctic in 1946. He spent 4 hours down a crevasse chipping out one of his colleagues who was stuck by the chest 40feet down. This was mostly in the dark and quite a bit was while suspended upside down. In 1945, crevasse rescue was in its infancy – very few people who slipped, unroped, into a crevasse, ever survived.

In 1971 Albert Medallists were invited to exchange their medal for a George Cross. Kevin was one of a very few who elected to keep the original medal. Kevin has always been an active member of the VCGC club and has thoroughly enjoyed meeting many interesting and often humble people who have displayed conspicuous gallantry. Kevin has always been very embarrassed that he is included in such an elite group. His attitude to the incident which led to the Albert Medal is summed up by him – “John was stuck down a crevasse, somebody had to help him and I happened to know more about rope work and mountaineering than any of the others present so it was logical that I should go down”. He considers that it was just something that had to be done and should not be considered as an act of bravery. Others may agree to differ.

The citation for the Albert medal reads..... etc.

Other awards; DSC, presented 23.11.43, 1939-45 star, Atlantic Star with Rosette, Africa Star, Burma Star, War medal with MiD Oakleaf (April 1944 HMS Duncan for destruction of 2 U boats. N Atlantic), Polar medal with Clasp and Silver Commendation for Brave Conduct (for crevasse rescue on South Georgia 01.01.1952), QSJM and QGJM.

BOOKS PUBLISHED:

Making things Work, What Engineering is (Books on engineering for children), Two Years in the Antarctic, A Portrait of Antarctica, Of Dogs and Men (summary of history of huskies in the Antarctic).