

MORE RIPPING YARNS

And now, a letter from one of our older readers

LEST WE FORGET ... a tale of true heroes

Sir,

Over the years I have followed with interest the tales of derring-do involving intrepid motorcyclists accomplishing wonderfully foolhardy things on their machines; Laurence of Arabia crossing continents on his Brough Superior, the legendary Evel Knievel crossing the Grand Canyon on his Harley Davidson and, more recently, my next door neighbour crossing Wolverhampton City Centre on his Honda 90 in the school holidays. And living to tell the tale, I might add.

However, I feel that as I approach my ninetieth summer it is high time I put the historical record straight by revealing my own exploits which, I am proud to relate, took place as long ago as World War II when, as a much younger and fitter (and probably more foolhardy!) man myself I utilized my previously moribund experience as one of The Flying Dildos Performing Motorcycling Circus Troupe and volunteered for active duty in the newly-formed and highly sensitive War Allies New Knowledge Executive for Research and Science, or 'Wankers' as we came to be known.

As you will appreciate, much of our work was top secret but I feel that after a lifetime of silence I have earned the right to acknowledge the existence of Wankers and highlight the brave contribution of our lads. Much of our exploits have been lost in the mists of time but it was one particularly suicidal operation that sticks in the memory and it involves the absolutely true story behind the sinking of the battleship Turpitz in South America in the Year of our Lord 1943.

Prior to the war all exports of steel from the UK were restricted and it was under much cover of darkness that I was one of a team involved in sawing up old BSA B40s with sidecars and exporting them *incognito* for use on the isolated dirt tracks of the Amazon where they were in desperately short supply to shore up their burgeoning banana trade, in much the same way as Saddam Hussein later tried concealing his supergun, although of course he was more interested in Middle Eastern and eventual world domination than bananas but you see my point.

Anyway, I well recall how whole sections of sidecar, for example, were shipped disguised as artificial leg replacements to be later smelted in secret kilns deep in the forest and rebuilt as motorcycles with tradesman's sidecars by highly skilled South American craftsmen from the Keipi tribe. I also recall with pride how craftily the tribe members contrived to help us and their leader, a strapping lad of 3'10 inches tall and with the title of 'world's tallest midget' already to his credit, himself had the remarkable distinction of possessing an artificial leg with a real foot. Truly an amazing man. But let me not digress.

This surreptitious trade continued unrecognised and undisturbed until us Wankers were asked to modify a reconstructed single-cylinder thumper with twin air-flotation bags and a small brass propeller wired to its layshaft, and which because of its size could thus avoid coastal radar, with forward torpedo tubes and set out under cover to ram the Turpitz moored in the harbour.

We knew the regular Navy could supply covering fire but were unable to score a direct hit due to jungle coverage and so we ventured out, pointed the outfit at Turpitz and dived overboard just as she collided head-on. We were but lads at the time but we were already hardened enough to understand the awfulness of war and I recall the sickening roar of the explosion in my ears before passing out and waking up in a hospital bed back in blighty, mission successfully accomplished.

But it was to be no hero's welcome for me. A man from the Ministry made me sign all manner of documents including a secrecy clause and NHS deafness-disclaimer and nothing more was ever mentioned of our exploits, although I do believe that the cinematic version of *The African Queen* in which Humphrey Bogart and Kathryn Hepburn get married on a German battleship just before the torpedoes in AQ strike and sink the enemy ship to the strains of 'Ich bin getting married in das morning' (that last bit later sub-edited out, I gather) was a back-handed compliment to our own efforts in real life.

In a singularly curious coincidence I also note that at precisely the same time the Turpitz went down, taking our erstwhile floating motorcycle with it, the South American banana export market dipped temporarily commensurate with a discernible change in skill pattern in the Keipi tribe who ventured more profitably into cocaine production, at which they are now recognised world leaders.

I trust this is of interest to your readers and if any of my old biking chums are out there, especially Norris 'Skip' Cuthbert and Alfonso 'Daggerman' Pirelli, are reading this then I would love to hear from you after all these years whilst we still have time on our sides.

God bless your wonderful website and all who contribute to her.

I am Sir,
Faithfully yours

Surgeon-Commander H. Norrington-Gusset, RN (retired)
Now c/o The Abide-a wee Home for Retired Gentlefolk,
Tipton,
West Midlands

... as told one quiet Sunday afternoon to Graham Fisher MBE (no relation)