

PHONE CONVERSATION WITH JOHN CAMPBELL

29 October 2013. Dr John Holliday

"I had an extraordinarily interesting war." He volunteered for the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders from St Andrews University. He was posted at first to Shetland but soon found himself in North Africa serving under Colonel Lorn Campbell, VC. The CO took an interest in him because of the shared surname. Alan MacCallum, from Tiree, was his batman there. He was sent off on patrol towards the enemy's lines. His group became the centre of a fire fight between the two lines. After two men had been killed and his corporal shouted for the rest of the party to retreat before they were all killed, and the young 2nd Lt. had no option but to follow them. After that John felt the regiment believed he was guilty of cowardice and he was blacklisted. He was wounded shortly afterwards and ended up behind the lines where he learned Italian. He was then sent from Algiers to Naples. He fell foul of an adjutant for commandeering a jeep and was sent on the worst courses, including a night patrol course. After the course had finished he went to unroll the bedroll he had been given and found there a green box containing German Army booby traps. He showed them to the Major who had a red face and a white moustache and as soon as the Major saw them his face lit up and asked him he could have one or two for his collection. John told him he could have them all. They got talking and the Major asked John what his plans were. John said he wasn't getting very far in the Argyll and Sutherlands and he fancied a go with the Special Forces. It happened that they were recruiting that day and there was a queue round the block. The major walked right in with John and said to the Recruiting Officer that he had a first rate candidate who spoke fluent Italian. That was how he ended up joining Popski's Private Army who fought with the partisans against the Nazis in Italy. He ended the war as a Captain and won the MC with bar.

He was demobbed after the war and went back to his parents in Ireland. He had always wanted to go to sea but had been "thwarted" by poor eyesight in one eye. His room mate in St Andrews had joined the Navy and he had been very envious. So, with his savings from the war and some help from his grandmother, he bought a 45 foot twin-engined fishing boat and the yacht the *Oceana*. She was a two masted schooner, 99 feet at the waterline and sailed "beautifully". Under sail she could make 6 knots and with motor on top could reach 12 knots. Originally she had sailed with a crew of 16. He bought her in Cowes and worked her out of Falmouth for a summer taking guests out for the day and letting them hold the sails and giving them a meal. That winter he took the *Oceana* to Dublin and docked her opposite the *Valera*.

He fished out of Howth and found the Irish fishing community very friendly. There was no class distinction and they just "treated people as people." Eventually one of the Gardner engines broke down and he tried to take the engine to Northern Ireland for repair. They wouldn't let him through the border with it. On one engine he set off with an old army comrade but was hit by a storm off Rathlin Island and was only rescued by

the skin of his teeth by the lifeboat because he had happened to bring a set of flares with him.

He went back to Dublin and the *Oceana* and teamed up with a fellow Popski veteran, Pat Balke, who was a builder. He used to help by driving the van. John's plan was to go out to Kenya in the *Oceana* and apply the fishing techniques he had learnt in Ireland in the Indian Ocean. One day another boat moored alongside crewed by Latvians. None of the crew could speak English, but John had spent time in Austria at the end of the war and had picked up some German. He was able to have a conversation with the captain, who turned out had been a Riga tug boat skipper before the war and had served his time on a sailing ship. The crew had all escaped the Russian occupation of their country, which they said was worse than that of the Germans. They had ended up in Sweden and were looking for a vessel to take them all to the United States. They admired the *Oceana* and eventually asked if they could hire her to cross the Atlantic. They agreed her motors weren't powerful enough, but they said they could fit a new one in Sweden. John had nothing else to do so he agreed to charter his boat. They left Dublin on 28 December 1948 but another storm hit them and tore their sails to shreds. They limped into Liverpool where the tug boat skipper showed his skill as an engineer and repaired most of the damage.

They set sail again on March 9 1949 and John handed the wheel to the Latvian tug boat skipper because he thought he had more experience than him under sail deep sea. In hindsight he regrets that decision because the Latvian insisted on sailing to the south of Tiree instead of heading out into the Atlantic where it would have been safer. He would have "got out to bloody sea!" The wind was offshore but strengthened and darkness fell. They were "shipping it green" when one of the crew spotted some lights to port and they thought these represented another ship. They therefore turned towards them. The lights were on Tiree Airport control tower and the boat immediately hit the sands of the shore. Fortunately, they landed on sand and not on the rocks nearby.

The crew huddled in the saloon but the island coastguards "saved us extremely quickly" and dragged us through the surf on a line from a Breeches Buoy. They were "beautifully saved" and John says "his gratitude towards them is huge." They were taken and looked after "brilliantly" in the Scarinish Hotel under John Brown. Before the rescued crew left the island on the ferry they went back to the beach where the *Oceana* was lying intact. He salvaged a few of the more valuable items like lamps and gave them to a fishing boat to take back to Ireland for him. Unfortunately the fishing boat docked at Port Rush in Northern Ireland and the items were impounded by the port authorities because of unpaid harbour dues some years before when John had been fishing there. He doesn't know what became of them.

In 1951 he went out to Africa where his parents were living. He was encouraged to apply for the Kenya Administrative Service and went along for an interview in Nairobi. He was told in no uncertain terms that the Service did not employ men with medals because they were too unreliable. He went back to his parents who were on holiday in a hotel in

a town called Nyeri and told the sorry story. Also staying at the hotel was the Head of the Service, Edward Windley, who got to hear about John's experience. He was furious and insisted on taking John back to Nairobi and hired him on the spot! He went on to work for the Kenya Administrative Service for 10 years. He then joined the Diplomatic Service and ended up as the Consul-General in Naples. He looks back at his life as a series of chance events that shaped his story. He is going to call his autobiography *Ladders and Snakes*. If he hadn't been wrecked on Tiree he would never have enjoyed the success he had later in life.