

# Reluctant hero found peace in Norfolk village

He was one of the greatest naval heroes of the second world war, but Robert Ryder fought shy of publicity before finding contentment in the peaceful seclusion of a Norfolk home by the shores of the Wash, writes **Steve Snelling**.

**A**s naval heroes go, Robert 'Red' Ryder was a man cast in the classic mould. Brave almost beyond belief, he was as resolute as he was reserved and relentlessly self-effacing. Devotion to duty was not so much an aspiration as a way of life.

His adventures in war and peace read like a real-life ripping yarn. From steering a ketch on a year-long voyage half way round the world to captaining a tired old schooner through three hazardous years of Antarctic exploration and leading one of the most audacious raids of the second world war, his exploits surpassed even the most outrageous of fictional escapades.

In the course of two amazing years, he survived, by some miracle, being cast adrift for four lonely days in the Atlantic and a seemingly suicidal feat of arms that proved his finest hour before going on to assist James Bond creator Ian Fleming form a crack naval intelligence unit.

As one of my boyhood heroes, he seemed to me a latter-day Hornblower whose unwavering courage in the face of overwhelming odds during the 1942 raid on St Nazaire was a memorable highlight of my comic-reading days. With his granite-jawed good looks and steely determination, 'Red' Ryder seemed the stirring stuff of legend, a genuine, real-life superman.

A half century on, I am aware of just how embarrassed he would have felt at such a one-dimensional impression. Instead, thanks to Richard Hopton's beguiling and revealing new biography, I am presented with an altogether richer portrait in which one curious image stands out in its comical incongruity.

It is of the great naval hero in reticent retirement in Norfolk, beating a hasty retreat from Sunday worship at Wolferton Church for fear of being forced to indulge in "churchyard chit-chat".

That none of this was an affectation or a display of false modesty is amply demonstrated in Hopton's compelling study that explores the complex and, at times, contradictory nature of a man who, for much of his life, displayed every bit as much determination in avoiding the public spotlight as he did in ensuring the destruction of one of the most heavily defended dry docks in enemy-occupied Europe.



**Family man: 'Red' Ryder at the height of his fame during the war with his wife Hilaré and son Lisle.**

Launcelot Fleming, a one-time bishop of Norwich who was a close friend of Ryder's from their time spent in Antarctica, described him as "a supremely humble man" and an intensely "private one".

Hopton goes further. "He absolutely detested playing the role of hero," he says. "That's where the title of the book came from. A Reluctant Hero is what he was.

"Not in the sense of being reluctant to do his duty. Quite the reverse. He was always willing to put his life on the line. He simply couldn't bear all the trappings that came with being a national hero, which is what he became following the raid on St Nazaire."

Typical of his attempts to avoid publicity was his exit from Buckingham Palace following his Victoria Cross investiture. In an effort to outwit journalists gathered outside, he slipped out via a side-door, sparking a comic-opera chase through central London involving 20 members of his own family and an assorted press pack.

Apologising to his wife, Hilaré, he made a fist of explaining his actions: "I am sorry I couldn't revel & wallow in the proceedings etc as perhaps my Mother would have liked, but I do dislike that sort of thing. I hope I didn't appear very surly.

“For the rest of his life he doggedly shied away from unwanted attention, even to the point of doing his level best to write himself out of the story”



**Master and hound: 'Red' Ryder VC in peaceful retirement at Wolferton with one of his**

I didn't mean to..."

For the rest of his life he doggedly shied away from unwanted attention, even to the point of doing his level best to write himself out of the story of the raid he'd planned and led with such distinction. Commenting on his post-war account, a reviewer described it as "almost irritatingly self-effacing", adding: "the reader is left to fill in from his own imagination much that Commander Ryder could much better have supplied".

Though not altogether uncommon among men of his age and background, his modesty was as extreme as his social ineptitude was excruciating.

Never one for small talk, particularly among strangers, he was described as the sort of party guest who would "hide in the corner".

Hopton prefers to think of him as having had a "public and a private persona". "He certainly doesn't come across as someone who was the life and soul of the party, but, privately, by all accounts, he was very jolly, devoted to practical jokes, loved his family and his spaniels and had a twinkling sense of fun."

Split personality or not, there is no question that any social awkwardness was in stark contrast to his myriad sea-going accomplishments. Sailing, above almost all things, was his great love and about which he wrote with a rare passion.

Years later, he recalled an early trip aboard his brother Lisle's converted fishing smack where they experienced "just about everything - strong winds, fog and calms" and which left "a deep and exciting impression on my young mind".

It was, what Hopton calls, "an epiphany" that would lead him to break with family tradition by choosing a career not in the army, as his father and brother had done, but in the Royal Navy.

It was a decision he would never regret, though life in the peacetime navy was little to his taste.

Indeed, he proved himself remarkably adept in avoiding the doldrums of routine service life by embarking on a series of adventures which marked him out as a mariner of exceptional skills.

The first of these came seven years after joining the navy and just six years after being awarded the King's Dirk as the outstanding cadet of the year. It involved building and sailing the yacht Tai-Mo-Shan from Hong Kong to England, an epic voyage of some 17,000 miles.

As a veteran of Fastnet races with a reputation as a first class navigator, Ryder took command of the five-strong crew of naval officers.

In charting their incident-filled journey which featured a star-sprinkled stopover in Hollywood, Hopton gives the lie to speculation that the cruise was a cover for a clandestine spying expedition around the Japanese Kurile Islands. "The whiff of espionage adds a dash of glamour to the voyage," he writes, "but, sadly, it is not borne out by the facts."

Ever restless for more adventure, Ryder was already plotting his next challenge even before the Tai-Mo-Shan reached Dartmouth in May, 1934, almost a year to the day after leaving Kowloon harbour.

During a delay in Bermuda, he discovered the Admiralty was looking "for one lieutenant capable of commanding & navigating a 112ft topsail schooner for a three-year voyage to the Antarctic".

"He was desperate to go," says Hopton. "Not least because the alternative was either to leave the navy, which given the economic climate, was not a great prospect, or go back to ordinary service which he didn't much fancy."

"What this period showed was his steeliness, his determination to ensure that come hell or high water he would be appointed to the Penola."

Helped by some "judicious string-pulling", Ryder succeeded in joining the John Rymill-led British Graham



beloved springers.

Land Expedition venturing into largely unexplored ice packs of western Antarctica. What followed was, Hopton believes, a daunting test of navigation and seamanship that Ryder considered "his greatest achievement".

"The thing was they had no money," says Hopton. "Scott's expedition 20-odd years earlier had a budget of £100,000. But Rymill, in the midst of the Great Depression and despite two decades or more of inflation, could only muster £20,000.

"That's why they had to make do with the Penola.

"She was a terrible old tub, with terrible engines and a square-rigged foremast. She was like something out of the age of Nelson. So it was amazing that in very hazardous conditions in the Antarctic he kept her going without a single accident for three years."

By the end of a decade crowded with incident peacetime adventure had given way to wartime service which, predictably, saw Ryder singled out for special operations, initially aboard a converted merchant ship designed to lure U-boats to destruction and later in support of daring amphibious sorties.

Each brought their share of drama. None more so than the events of June 1940 when his first wartime command, HMS Willamette Valley, was torpedoed and sunk with heavy loss of life.

"How he survived was quite incredible," says Hopton. "He was alone on a piece of flotsam for four days, knee-deep in seawater, with no food or water and with what he thought was little prospect of rescue.

"As skipper he knew he was roughly 350 miles from the south west coast of Ireland in the middle of nowhere.

"And, following the fall of France, he believed convoys would have been re-routed away from the area and the threat of U-boats, so he had a pretty strong idea

that nothing would be passing his way.

"Yet, such was his strength of character, he clung on and, by a great stroke of good fortune, he was found and picked up by a ship from what turned out to be the last convoy going that way."

Rescue was tainted by the loss of so many of his crew and the news his brother Lisle, with whom he had shared so many sailing adventures, had been killed in France.

Only after the war was over did he learn the full story of Lisle's unnecessary death as the leader of an heroic rearguard of Royal Norfolks murdered in cold blood near a village called Le Paradis.

Ryder's own fortunes continued to oscillate. In the space of a year, he experienced the joy of marriage, the despair of losing another ship, this time to an accidental collision in thick fog, and the shock of being handed command of a naval force assigned to the desperate mission that would come to define his 24-year senior service career.

The attack on St Nazaire in March 1942 has, with justice, been described as the "greatest raid of all". Designed to render the port's great dry dock unusable to the German battleship Tirpitz, it succeeded brilliantly, although only at great cost. Only a handful of the commando force evaded death, injury or captivity and the overwhelming majority of motor launches that braved the batteries lining the Loire were sunk.

Ryder's survival - he came through the night-long struggle on land and sea without a scratch - was almost as miraculous as his emergence alive from the Willamette Valley tragedy.

He found it difficult to describe the "full fury" of the fire let loose upon his vulnerable force from guns "large and small" that turned the night into "one mass of red and green tracer".

Just listening to his account of the raid was enough to give his wife "cold shudders".



**Family group (top): Robert Ryder, seated second from the right, with his parents and siblings around the time he joined the Royal Navy. His older brother Lisle, far left, was commander of the Royal Norfolk Regiment rearguard that was massacred in cold blood by SS troops near Le Paradis in 1940.**

**Greatest raid of all (above): An artist's impression of Ryder's most celebrated action, leading the naval force into St Nazaire in March 1942.**

The action served as a timely tonic and the award of Ryder's VC was little more than a richly merited formality. However, distinction brought with it a lifelong burden.

Being feted and treated as "public property" held no appeal whatsoever, leading his wife to observe, plaintively, "he gets sick of people coming up and congratulating him".

Unsurprisingly, the rest of the war, and his life thereafter, proved an anti-climax. St Nazaire was followed by the dismal failure of Dieppe, where Ryder demonstrated moral courage to match his physical courage by refusing to sacrifice lives in a doomed enterprise, an attachment to an intelligence unit inspired by Ian Fleming, a supporting role in the D-Day landings and a monotonous spell of destroyer work on the Arctic convoys.

An unlikely if short-lived post-war political career in which he failed to make his parliamentary mark was mirrored by unappealing business ventures of varying and largely unsatisfying success summed up by Ryder in a single "disparaging" sentence. "I do not think," he wrote, "that the rest of my life will be of much if any lasting interest."

So far as achievements on a par with his great sea-going adventures go, he was undoubtedly right, but the latter half of his life was certainly not devoid of personal pleasures.

"While he was aware of the fact that his later life didn't live up to the promise of his early ventures, he wasn't tortured by it on a daily basis and nor did he live under a cloud of depression," says Hopton.

As well as indulging his love of sailing each summer, Ryder found contentment with his wife in retirement in Norfolk. Settling in Wolferton on the Sandringham estate, the Old Rectory, an attractive early Victorian house of local carstone overlooking the Wash, became their home for 13 "very happy" years.

During that time, Ryder served as churchwarden for 12 years and developed an unexpected devotion to a pair of springers, which he trained as gun dogs.

As a neighbour to the Royal Family, the Ryders dined with the Queen and Prince Philip and, on occasion, "Red" was invited to join shooting parties, although he was predictably modest of his own record. "I am terribly out of practice," he wrote following one such excursion, "but it didn't seem to matter very much. Fortunately I didn't pepper Prince Charles or anything like that & Prince Philip was warned that I was a bad shot."

Ryder continued to live quietly as much as possible away from the public gaze. Aside from weekly church services, he mixed infrequently beyond his own family.

"Left to his own devices," his brother-in-law said, "he wouldn't have seen anybody."

Nine years after leaving Norfolk and less than four years after the death of his wife Hilaré who he adored, the warrior who found belated peace on the shores of the Wash, died at sea while in the wheelhouse of his boat during a summer's cruise to France.

It was a peculiarly apt end for a modest and most reluctant hero whose remarkable life is remembered in a bench that sits outside the porch of St Peter's in Wolferton.

Gifted by the St Nazaire Society, its under-stated inscription provides a fitting epigraph to the memory of Captain Robert Ryder VC, RN:

*"A skilled and daring seaman.  
A true leader and a Christian Gentleman..."*

**A Reluctant Hero: The Life of Captain Robert Ryder VC, by Richard Hopton, is published by Pen & Sword, priced £19.99.**