

Fireman Robert “Bob” Charles Pittard.

1921 to 27th December 2016



“Bob’s Story” commemorates the life of an unassuming gentleman, who’s heroic actions contributed to saving many lives throughout his war service with the Royal Navy and latterly as a fireman serving with Bath City Fire Brigade and Ambulance Service. These experiences of life, were to remain with Bob throughout his Fire Brigade career, giving him the exceptional ability to deal with any situation without question.

Bob was a country boy, the middle of the three sons of Edgar and Daisy Pittard, he had an older brother Thomas Edgar (known as Tom) and a younger brother Stephen. The boys were all born in Pylle, Street on the Fosse, Somerset, where Bob attended the local school. Their home address was simply The Homestead, Pylle, Near Shepton Mallett. His first job was at Pylle Poultry Farm where he worked alongside Tom until, with WW2 looming, both boys volunteered to serve their King and Country.

Bob was only seventeen when he joined the Royal Navy on May 1st 1939 from where, after an initial four months training at HMS Drake, Devonport Barracks, he joined HMS Basilisk at Dover and was on board when she was sunk off the coast of Dunkirk whilst assisting in the evacuation of allied troops from the beaches. Following his actions on that day Bob was recognised by the Dunkirk Veterans Association and later awarded the “La Ville de Dunkerque” Certificate. Bob returned to HMS Drake (presumably for further training) in June 1940 by which time he had been promoted to Able Seaman.



Around the same time as Bob joined the Navy so his brother, Tom, had enlisted as a driver with the Royal Army Service Corp. Sadly Tom was tragically killed in a road traffic accident on 1st July 1941.... according to the family he was “*accidentally run over by Army lorry*”. At his Funeral Service held at St Thomas of Canterbury Parish Church, Pylle on July 21st (reported in full in the Shepton Mallet Journal, City of Wells Reporter and County Advertiser) Able Seaman R.C. Pittard stood alongside his parents, family and friends as they said their goodbyes.

According to his Certificate of Service (*now lovingly kept by his son Steven and his daughter Julia*) and his own written memories (*which, with his family’s permission we have reproduced at the end of this story*) Bob was to serve on a variety of ships in various exciting but very dangerous parts of the world until, towards the end of 1945, he was back in Devonport “aboard” HMS Drake and HMS Defiance (*shore based establishments*) for torpedo training...he qualified with a 71.5% pass mark. However, throughout these troubled times Bob clearly left an impression on all those who knew him because, in the words of his last Commanding Officer (Lt. D. Rowen-Price R.N.) his general efficiency on discharge was of a “*very satisfactory and high standard*”. Lt. Rowan-Price also commented on Bob’s “*very good character and reliability*” throughout his entire Service.

Bob left the Royal Navy on 5th January 1947 and immediately transferred to the Royal Fleet Reserve at Devonport for next two years, before moving to the Electrical Branch. When he was finally discharged from the “Reserves” at Devonport on September 24th, 1951 Bob was qualified as an Electricians Mate 1st Class.

After eight years in the Royal Navy Bob had the skills and discipline to prepare him for a life in civvy street and it would therefore seem a natural progression for him to begin a new career with the City of Bath Fire and Ambulance Service.



1939. Cleveland Bridge Fire Station Bath.

With the ending of hostilities and the restoration of Bath to its former glory, Bob was joining a new and unique combined Fire Brigade and Ambulance Service which, under The Fire Services Act of 1947, would now be the responsibility of Bath City Council, thus taking over all firefighting functions from the National Fire Service.



The Cleveland Bridge station at Bath was to be Bob’s “Fire Brigade home” for the next thirty years and one he would recall with much fondness.

Bob married his beloved Audrey (Williams) on the 9th September 1950 at West Twerton Church.... their first date having been at The Fair at Twerton Park after which the couple lived in a flat at Combe Park, Bath before moving “across the valley” to Chalcombe Lane, Larkhall, Bath. Around this time the “in thing” for keeping your house warm was to use old newspapers as loft insulation (long before cavity foam), something Bob and Audrey clearly adhered to... as Steven & Julia were later to find out when they cleared their parent’s house.

Steven’s second car was a Humber Sceptre and, whilst “*tinkering under the bonnet*”, he accidentally dropped a spanner onto the battery...it caught fire but fortunately Dad was on hand and smothered it with his coat.



Bob, Julia & Steven



BATH CYCLIST’S FATAL PLUNGE INTO RIVER

On Thursday 30th June 1955 Bob and a work colleague, Noel Buttimore, were enjoying what they thought would be a quiet drink in the Windsor Castle Inn, Upper Bristol Road, Bath when seventeen-year-old Angela Russell rushed in crying “*Can anyone swim, there’s a man in the river*”!!!”.

Leaving the Landlords wife to telephone for help, Bob and Noel (*both expert swimmers with Royal Life Saving Society Awards*) ran to the river where, taking off their jackets, the pair joined John Cox who was already in the water desperately searching for the man. Bob and Noel were in the river for some time until they eventually found the body of nineteen-year-old Ronald James Kent a few yards downstream from where he had fallen in. Getting him back to the bank they were joined by a Dr Brice and worked for nearly twenty minutes desperately trying to revive him before he was taken to the Royal United Hospital by ambulance where, sadly, Ronald was pronounced dead.

BATH WEEKLY CHRONICLE & HERALD

Coroner Commends Bath Girl (16) and Others for Bid to Save Drowning Boy

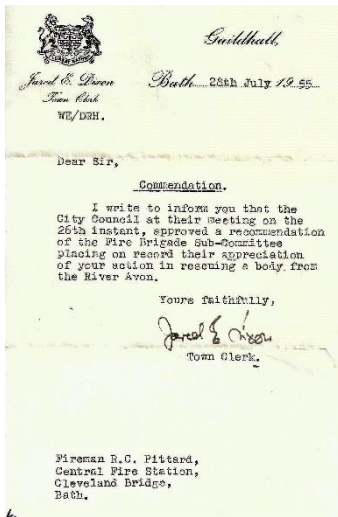
At the Coroner’s Inquest it was revealed that young Ronald was the youngest of 12 children of whom only he and his eldest brother were still living at home. His poor mother said he seldom went out at night, was never home late and it was when he was not back by 10pm that she had started to get worried, she added the first she knew of the tragedy was when her husband returned from telephoning Bath Central Police Station.

Young Angela Russell told the Inquest how she’d seen Ronald riding his bicycle very slowly along the path when the front wheel went over the riverbank and he was flung over the handlebars into the water where she could see him struggling about two to three yards from the bank. She said she heard him cry out before running to The Windsor Bridge Inn where two men (Noel and Bob) immediately ran to help.

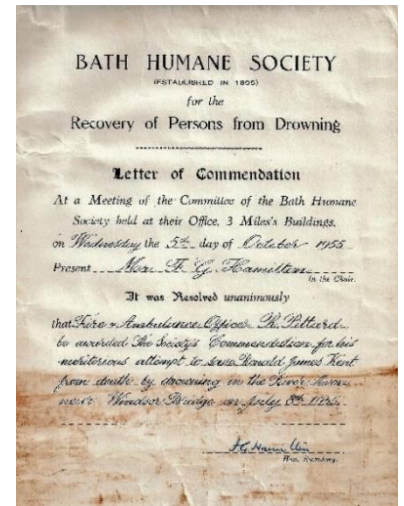
Noel Buttimore described how he and Bob went into the water, which was not very clear thanks to the pollution from the nearby gasworks, to search for Ronald and found him in no more than eight to ten feet of water. It took all their strength to get the body out of the water and Noel was quoted as saying “*He appeared to be dead but artificial respiration was attempted and oxygen administered straight away for about 25 minutes*”

Ronald’s distraught father said his son had experienced epileptic fits since the age of two but had ridden a bicycle for many years, however he said Ronald had suffered a blackout whilst riding his bike a year ago.

Summing up, the Coroner Mr W. Pepperell Pitt recorded a verdict of Accidental Drowning. At the same time, he commended the actions of Noel and Bob by saying “*they did all they could to find the young man in extremely dirty water and when he was brought out everything possible was done by the two officers*” whilst directing similar praise and thanks to all the others involved in the vain attempt to save Ronald’s life.



News of the tragic event on the river bank soon found its way to Bath City Council. On the 28th July 1955 the Town Clerk, Jared E. Dixon, wrote to Bob informing him that The Council had recommended “placing on record their appreciation of your actions in rescuing a body from the River Avon”. Finally, at the beginning of October 1955, it was unanimously “resolved” that Bob be awarded The Bath Humane Society Commendation in recognition of his “meritorious attempts to save the life of Ronald James Kent”.



As with all Fire Brigade families it is the stories passed on by parents, work colleagues and friends that remain in your memory and so it was when we spent a few hours reminiscing with Steven and Julia.

Highlight of the year was the children’s Christmas party as there was always plenty of food and, of course, a present from Father Christmas himself.

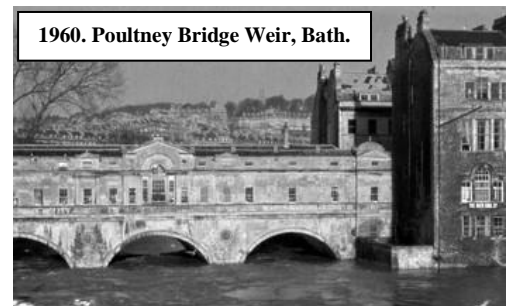
Bath Fire Station had their own Holiday Club ... Julia remembers going on trips for several years or so. The “club” was organised by Les Knott and his wife Mary, Charlie Blanchard and Les Parfitt. Initially it was for all Bath personnel, their family and friends.

Planning usually started around February each year and Julia remembers visiting some very adventurous places such as Elba, Sicily, Italy, Turkey & Bulgaria.

During the 1960’s Bath Floods...Poultney Bridge Weir flooded and not only did Bob volunteer to go in whilst off duty he also went down to the local Primary School (St Saviours, Larkhall) to see if he could help.

As the children of a fireman, Steven and Julia thought nothing of coming home to find a fire engine parked outside their house...the excuse being there was a hydrant by the gate that needed testing.

Paddy Creton recalls. “I knew Bob from 1964 when I joined the City of Bath Fire and Ambulance Service. He was a popular member of the Brigade and every inch the archetypal fireman as described by Sir Eyre Massey Shaw, an inspiration to us younger firemen. One of the most endearing traits of Bobs character was his wicked sense of humour and I remember an occasion back in the days of Control Log Books and “Station Logs/Diaries” when the Chief Officer, Mr Hall, returned from attending a council meeting demanding to know why the flag was raised over the Station. After long enquiries it could not be established how the instruction came to be entered in to the Station log. However, the matter was never resolved until many months later Bob reminded me of the incident and told me that the day in question had been his birthday”

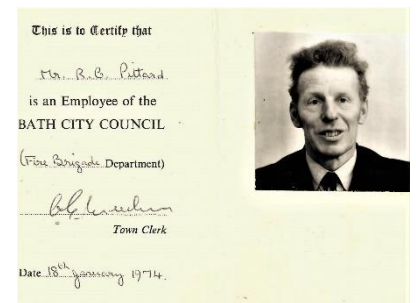


“Bob Pittard was just great to serve with, a fine man and someone we were proud to know and call friend”.

Bob with his Red Watch colleagues, on the final day of the City of Bath Fire Brigade, prior to County of Avon amalgamation, 31st March 1974.

Back row left to right. Roland Hindmarsh, Pete Marsh, Reg Hobbs, Bryan Wetten, Ron Marchant, Brian Joyce, Sandy Sanders and Paddy Creton.
Front row, left to right. Dave Holley Dennis Perrils, Roger Davies, Dave Perryman, Bob Pittard and Jeff Toop.

Robert (Bob) Charles Pittard retired from the County of Avon Fire Brigade on the 25th Sep 1976, after a career spanning 30 years'. Amongst his precious Fire Brigade memories left to his son and daughter is a letter received from Chief Fire Officer Terrance McCarthy in which he not only expresses the *"appreciation of your efficient service over such a long period"* from the Chairman and Members of the Public Protection Committee, but also his personal thanks and appreciation for *"the service you have rendered so loyally and conscientiously during the whole of your service"*



However, not quite ready to sit down with his pipe and slippers, Bob went to work for local builders and fellow Fire Brigade colleagues, Brian Love & Trevor Cocks who had set up their own builder's business "Love & Partners".

Even with advancing years, Bob never lost his independent nature, no more is this evident than when you read about his attempt at repairing the roof. On 26th August 2015, at the age of 94, he climbed up a ladder, which was secured safely to the wall, to check out a leaky roof that had *"bothered"* him for years. As a retired builder, he decided the gulley needed new lead flashings but, as he was *"already up there"*, thought he may as well look further up the roof. He was sitting above the bedroom window when he slipped off the gulley and landed in a hedge below. Meanwhile Audrey, who was now sadly suffering from dementia, thought Bob had gone to bed and locked the front door... totally unaware he was outside lying unconscious on a cold concrete path. Bob was found the next morning (*near to death and suffering from hyperthermia*) by a neighbour who, fortunately, was a Physio Therapist at a Clinic in Bath. When Steven and Julia arrived at the Royal United Hospital they found Dad fighting for his life. Two days later they were told by the hospital that he probably would not make it through the night, however next day and expecting the worst, they found Dad sitting up in bed eating his breakfast.

At this point, unaware he had been *"up mending the roof"*, the pair were still looking for his car keys and it was only whilst Julia was gathering some clean clothes to take into hospital that she happened to glance out of the bedroom window and saw the pocket from his sports coat hanging from the gutter. Going outside Julia looked up and saw his sandals still on the roof where they had slipped from his feet as he fell and it soon became abundantly clear why he kept asking if they had found his shoes yet!!!!

With Bob in hospital Audrey went to live in a Nursing Home in Larkhall as he had always cared for her, refusing any help. Realising they would never be able to return home and carry on as usual, Bob briefly joined Audrey at Oriel Lodge where, on 27th December 2016 at the age of 95, his *"heart gave out"* and he later passed away at the Royal United Hospital in Bath.



Bob's funeral service took place at Haycombe Crematorium on 23rd January 2017, his cortege escorted down the drive by an appliance and uniformed crew from his old Station at Bath.

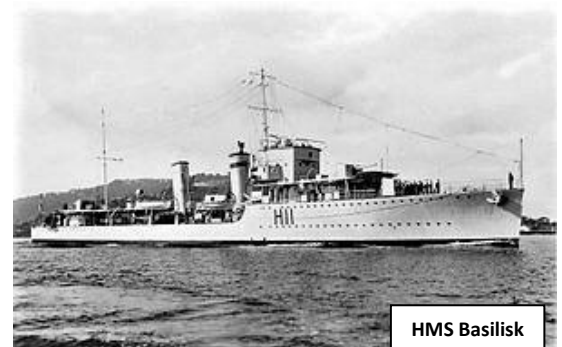
Julia said the family were not expecting this and were greatly touched. Steven later took some cakes into Bath Fire Station to say thank you to those who had accompanied Bob on his last "shout".

(Bob was joined by his beloved Audrey on 3rd February 2017)

"ROBERT PITTARD - ROYAL NAVY SERVICE"

The following is Bob's personal written account of his wartime service in the Royal Navy.

Joined the Navy in 1938-39 aged 17 did training in HMS Drake Devonport Barracks. In 1939 joined HMS Basilisk at Dover and we went on Dover Patrol in the English Channel also escorting Bon Adventure Minelayer, laying mines off the German Coast and taking to France various people. After a while we were sent to Norway for the second battle of Narvik where troops, including French, were put ashore. The Fjords were beautiful, especially at night when the houses were lit on the mountains but, during the day, were a benefit to the German aircraft which would criss-cross from side to side dropping bombs assisted by a spotter plane.



At the end of May beginning of June we were on our way to France where the British and French troops were being pushed towards the French coast. We were probably sent as the Basilisk was quite an old destroyer with

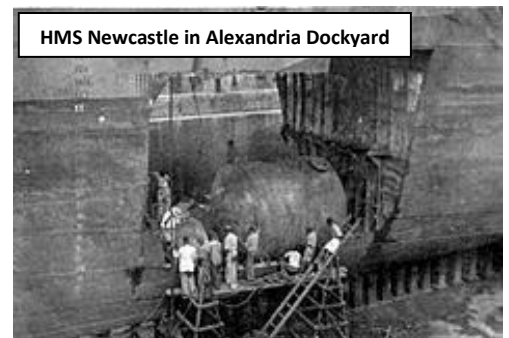
only 4.7" low angle guns, maximum elevation of about 45 degrees so of little use against aircraft. We took troops from Dunkirk to England but unfortunately were sunk at Dunkirk. After being in the water for a while I managed to get aboard our whaler and it was decided to head for England. At first, we could not get a tow as we were in a minefield, so we rowed towards England and when nearing the coast were towed to either Ramsgate or finishing up with a cup of tea and train ride to Devonport and a short leave at home.

On returning to barracks and being issued with new kit I spent a couple of weeks at, in an ex nudist camp, before being drafted to HMS Western Isles which was an ex Ferry called Tynwald II and a twin screwed ship which I believe was on the Isle of Man run before the war. It was a coal burner and being used as a depot ship at Tobermory for training asdic's, etc. for the new Corvettes being used for convoy work. It was here that I was told that my brother Tom had been killed in an accident.



After a couple of months, I was drafted to HMS Newcastle and issued with arctic kit, where we thought we were going up north, but instead sailed towards Freetown and Simonstown, South Africa and Capetown, we were on our way to the Far East via Durban and Colombo. Whilst we were in Colombo and in the Far Eastern Fleet the Prince of Wales and Repulse were sunk by the Japanese, leaving us the only modern 6" Cruiser there, the other ones were the Frobisher and, so it was decided to move from Trincomable back to Mombassa Rilibidi, East Africa where we spent time patrolling the Indian Ocean and Pacific.

Whilst there we were called to Alexandria to join a convoy, as escort, going to Malta. Unfortunately, we were torpedoed by a German E Boat but luckily it hit us right in front of A turret in the Bows and, despite the hole being big enough for a whaler to row in and out, we were able to carry on at reduced speed. We were emergency repaired and proceeded to Alexandria where the dockyard built a concrete bulkhead across the bows as the seas were beginning to affect the ship. We finally made our way to Brooklyn Navy Yard, New York, Long Island with some very nice people.



We returned to the Far East assisting in the recapturing of Ramry and other places. During our spell in the Far East we visited Sydney etc and Bombay, having a week's leave in, also visiting Cere and Hermanas in South Africa and Freetown. On returning to England Newcastle payed off and we had some leave.

NB. The Newcastle was torpedoed by the German E-boat S-56, on 15 June 1942, blowing a complete hole through her bows. The crew managed to save the ship and, as Bob mentioned, return to Alexandria at a reduced speed (4 knots; 7.4 km/h; 4.6 mph). Although she could not be fully repaired they were offered facilities to carry out their own temporary overhaul. This meant building an additional wooden bulkhead, strengthened by concrete, behind the damage. This bulkhead had to be replaced at ports in India, Ceylon, South Africa and Brazil, before she finally arrived at Brooklyn Navy Yard, New York, in the October where new bows were rebuilt by March 1943.

With our most grateful thanks to Julia & Steven for sharing their father's personal memories and for their kind permission in allowing us to tell Bob's story.

Chriss & Penny Deverill.

Avon Fire & Rescue Service Pensioners Association

1st February 2018