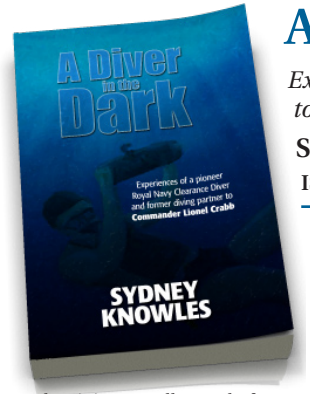

A Diver in the Dark

Experiences of a pioneer RN Clearance Diver and diving partner to Commander Lionel 'Buster' Crabb

SYDNEY KNOWLES

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Born and raised in Preston, Lancashire, Sydney Knowles volunteered to join the Royal Navy in 1939, aged 18. He served in the North Atlantic aboard RN destroyer HMS *Zulu* during the hunt for the *Bismarck* and on HMS *Lookout*, also a destroyer, on transatlantic convoy duty and later on 'Operation Pedestal', the famous naval convoy that broke the Siege of Malta in 1942 after withstanding intensive attacks by enemy aircraft and submarines, sustaining heavy losses.

On returning to the relative safety of Gibraltar after 'Pedestal', Sydney volunteered to join a small squad of Navy divers known as the Underwater Working Party, whose task was to protect Allied shipping at anchor in Gibraltar harbour against attack by Italian underwater saboteurs of the Gruppa Gamma. Equipped with nothing but swimming trunks, lead-weighted plimsolls and primitive underwater breathing apparatus, the British divers worked in all weathers to search, often in total darkness, beneath the hulls of Allied ships for mines attached by enemy frogmen. If they located such a device, they would have to try to cut it loose or call for the assistance of their commanding officer – Lieutenant (later Commander) Lionel 'Buster' Crabb. Crabb's expertise at rendering safe explosive marine devices would earn him a considerable reputation and, as his diving partner and assistant, Sydney accompanied him on a variety of mine disposal tasks. His hair-raising stories about their remarkable escapades together in Italy are justification enough for reading this book. But Sydney has much more to tell...

In the postwar years he and Commander Crabb renewed their association and in 1950 they dived together in search of a Spanish galleon that had sunk in Tobermory Bay on the Isle of Mull in 1588, reputedly filled with treasure, an ultimately unsuccessful quest that nearly cost Sydney his life. In 1955 he was invited to dive with the Commander again but under very different circumstances. Crabb asked Sydney to accompany him on a clandestine mission to spy on the Russian warship *Sverdlov* while it was moored in Portsmouth harbour on a goodwill visit. They dived together, discovered the secret of its remarkable manoeuvrability and returned undetected.

Crabb was by now a regular visitor to a house in Chelsea where Sir Anthony Blunt hosted soirées for a coterie of acquaintances, some of whom were later revealed to have been involved in the murky world of Cold War espionage. Sydney attended some of these gatherings but became increasingly confused by his ex-boss's behaviour and suspicious of the people he was associating with. Was Crabb a spy? Was he planning to defect? Sydney again found himself in the dark, but this time it was regarding the Commander's intentions...

Sydney's memories of these meetings and of subsequent events that culminated in the disappearance of Commander Crabb in 1956, provide a unique insight into a mystery that remains unsolved to this day.

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