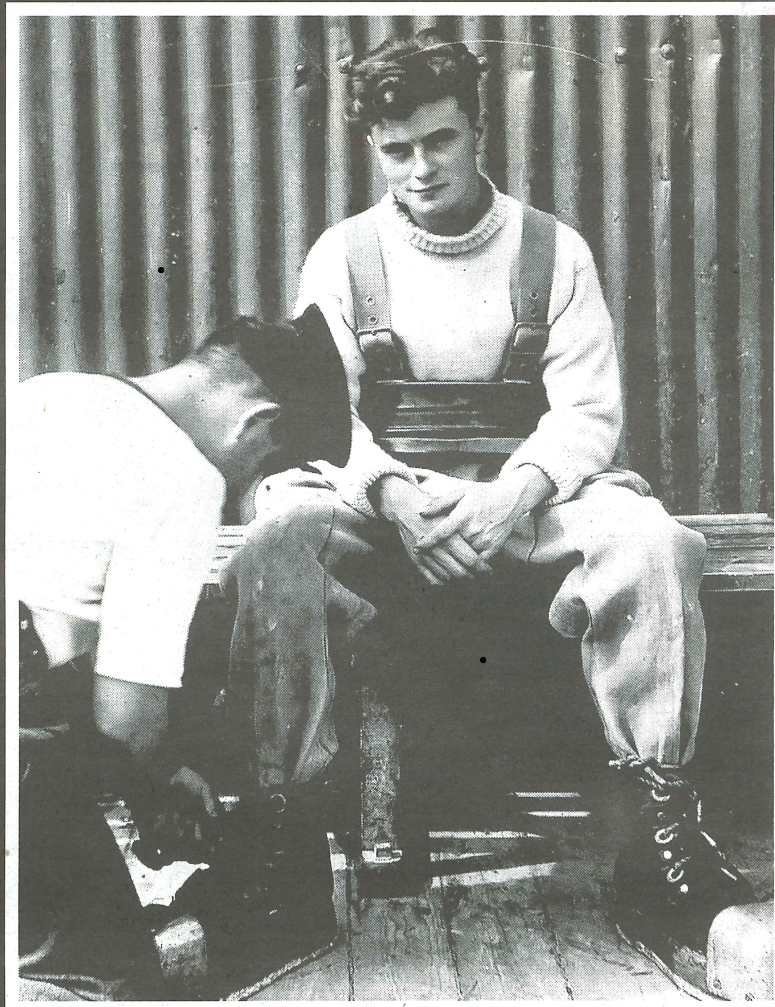


NEWS

HERO OF THE DEEP



Tributes for diver who did one of the deadliest jobs in the war



■ Navy diver Ray Maries in the early 1940s



■ Ray in 1977 with daughter Susan, Michael and grandson Richard

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IN a world where the accolade "hero" is over-used and, at times, unjustified, Ray Maries was every inch a hero.

Quite simply, it's a miracle that Ray, who died on Tuesday at the age of 91, survived the war years.

That's because the Solihull veteran was one of the brave band known as "P Parties".

That's short for Port Clearance Parties and the naval divers who made up that elite force were handed the harrowing job of clearing unexploded sea mines.

He was also seconded to the US Navy for a period during the war, carrying out the same duties.

Blinded by silt and mud, Ray groped in the murky waters of docks and harbours for mines.

Ray, who passed away at Edgbaston's Queen Elizabeth Hospital following pneumonia, was also a star on civvy street.

He received the British Empire Medal for his work with Solihull Sea Cadets Corps, TS Gamecock.

He served as petty officer with the group from 1965 to 1986.

Many veterans remained silent about their wartime deeds. Not Ray.

"Think of Uncle Albert in *Only Fools and Horses*", laughs son-in-law Michael Jay. "That was



■ Son-in-law Michael Jay with Ray Maries' medals for his escapades

Ray! But I'll remember him as a courteous and very polite man."

And what stories the Old Salt had to tell! Somehow, he survived unscathed in the face of unbelievable danger. A one-off war pension payment for partial deafness was the only evidence of his action man role in the conflict.

He plunged into icy waters, even tackling the Arctic, protected by only the most basic equipment.

"In those days, they were not experienced in what gases would be best at what depths," says Michael. "The diving suits were very rudimentary - virtually a bag you climbed into and sealed by rolling it up to your waist. The job was so dangerous

that nearly all the men were unmarried volunteers.

"Known as Sladen suits, they were unheated and uncomfortable. Nowadays, hot water is pumped through them.

"He spoke about how severe the cold was. If you needed the toilet, you had no option but to go in your suit. Ray described the initial warmth of spending a penny as ecstasy!

"And the suits were in such short supply that when you took the suit off, another diver immediately stepped into it, regardless of what you'd done in it.

"Literally, you could not see your hand in front of your face down there because of all the mud that was kicked up.

"But Ray had a tremendous

sense of humour and most of his stories had a humorous angle."

Daughter Susan says: "It's only now, as we are clearing Dad's home, that we're beginning to realise how brave he was. He was everything. He worshipped my mother. She was a WAAF when they met and she always joked that she outranked Dad. He stayed an Able Seaman, which always surprised me. He was a real family man."

He was also full of stories - tall stories - intended to entertain his children. "I can remember him telling me that he'd been attacked by an octopus," recalls Susan. "I asked 'What did you do?'"

"He said 'You have to tickle them under the arms until they let go.'"

"Did he talk about the war?" she grins. "He didn't talk about anything else."

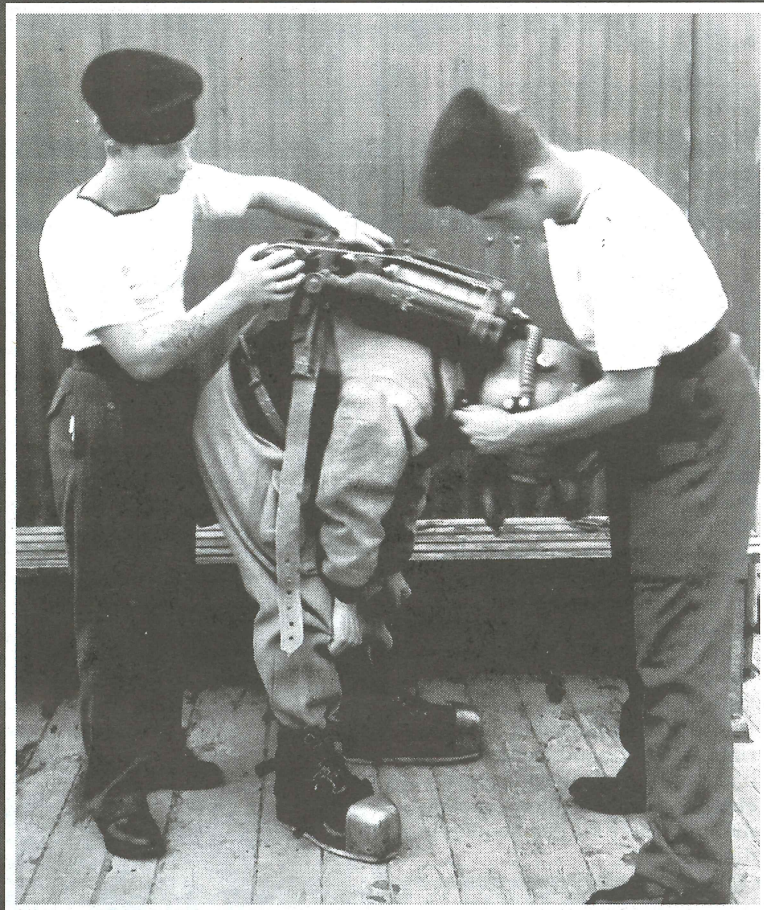
Ray was born in Sparkhill and raised in Hall Green. His father worked as a painter and decorator. He married Vicky in 1945 and the couple moved to Solihull. With his naval career behind him, he worked as a manager at an industrial paint business and enjoyed sailing and shooting.

Vicky died in 1977, and Ray was deeply affected by the loss. He spent his last week's at The Prince of Wales Nursing Home, Shirley.

Former neighbour, and friend for 50 years, John Logan added: "Ray was a hero, but he described himself as foolhardy. He was a very genuine man."

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■ Navy diver Ray Maries preparing for one of his death-defying dives to clear mines during the war



Rare breed with nerves of steel to clear mines

RAY Maries was a born fighter. He was eager for action as soon as the storm clouds of war gathered.

In 1939, he attempted to join the Royal Warwickshire Regiment at a Gosport Army Recruitment Office. He was only 14, but claimed to be two years older.

The colonel took one look at the boy and immediately sent him home.

Undeterred, Ray walked straight into a Royal Naval Recruitment Office, again in Gosport – and this time hit the jackpot. The Navy accepted him.

Serving on HMS Menastheus as a mine clearance diver with Naval Party 1573, Ray disarmed UXBs in near-zero visibility.

Because of a critical shortage of divers in the US Navy, Ray was “transferred” for a short period of time to the Americans.

“This made him very popular,” says son-in-law Michael. “He had access to goods such as chocolate and nylons, which were unavailable in Britain at the time.”

Ray’s bravery earned him a mention in dispatches and he was recently made a life member of the Association of First Class Naval Divers, based at the Royal Naval Dockyard, Portsmouth. He was also awarded the Arctic Medal.

His exploits made it into a book about the P Parties’ operations, *Open The Ports* by J Grosvenor and Lt Cmdr L.M. Bates.

Members of the P Parties were among the most decorated of the war, only rivalled by the Bomb Disposal Units.

Yet unlike the BDU, P Parties suffered only one fatality – and that wasn’t during action. William Brunskill was fatally injured by a V2 rocket on December 16, 1944, while watching a film at Cinema Rex, in Antwerp.

Thanks to the P Parties, key ports purged of mines included Cherbourg, Caen, Dieppe, Le Havre, Boulogne, Rouen, Calais, Antwerp, Ostend, Terneuzen, Zeebrugge, Flushing, Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Hamburg, and Bremen. Sixty mines were cleared from Bremen alone.

Today, only one P Parties diver remains – John Payne from Sussex. He served with Ray and the pair staged an emotional reunion to mark both of them reaching 60 years old.

Lady Luck smiled on Ray during the war years. He was a remarkable man who faced death on a daily basis – and later laughed about it.

Such were his heroics that even Ray’s family dismissed some of his tales as far-fetched. Now, they realise the gripping war stories were fact, not fiction.

Funeral arrangements have yet to be finalised, but a naval presence is expected.

■ Ray with his medals five years ago on The HMS Warrior in Portsmouth



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The job was so dangerous that nearly all the men were unmarried volunteers

Ray’s Son-in-law
Michale Jay