



Commander John Rigge RN OBE (32-35)

John Loftus Rigge was born in Shanghai in 1918 where his father was a China merchant trading everything from peanuts to elephants. The family returned to England in 1926 and settled in Yorkshire. John joined Conway as a Royal Naval Reserve Cadet. At 17, having been promoted Chief Cadet Captain and winning both the King's Gold Medal and the seamanship prize, he joined the Royal Navy. Much to his chagrin, his medical proved he was short sighted so he became a paymaster cadet in HMS *Frobisher* in the British West Indies.

John then joined the heavy cruiser HMS *London* which arrived off Barcelona to evacuate British nationals the day after the Spanish Civil War began. He became the contact with the British consul and, with Barcelona descending into anarchy, he helped to rescue many Spanish civilians. These included 20 nuns that John, with some trepidation, invited to watch a film being shown on the quarterdeck. It was Marlene Dietrich's *Desire*. To his relief the nuns viewed it with rapt attention.

His translation skills were further needed while serving as Captain's secretary on HMS *Sussex*, which was defending the neutral shipping towards the end of the Spanish civil war in 1939. The *Sussex* secured the release of four British cargo ships arrested by Spanish nationalist forces, but was unable to prevent the capture of the SS *Stangate* by the nationalist merchant raider *Mar Negro*.

In 1939, *Sussex* was searching for the *Admiral Graf Spee* and caught the German merchant ship *Watussi* south of Cape Town. The Germans scuttled the *Watussi* but everyone was rescued to the last 'man' – a small monkey clinging to the masts.

John married in September 1940, the day the London blitz began. Gentlemen in morning coats caught a German airman who parachuted down close to the wedding reception. The newlyweds arrived at the Savoy to be told they had to spend their wedding night in the cellars. No officer who attended the wedding, bar two cousins, survived the war and over the next two years John saw his wife for just 17 days.

In 1940, John, now Paymaster Lieutenant, joined HMS *Galatea* as assistant secretary to Rear Admiral Alba Curteis at Scapa Flow for anti-invasion duty in the North Sea and Channel. After a support role at Dunkirk, the *Galatea* embarked the British Ambassador after the Fall of France and helped evacuate Polish troops. John, a French-speaker as well as a Spanish speaker, was sent ashore – in uniform, tin hat and bearing arms – to help get a message from Churchill to French Admiral Darlan, and had to commandeer a boat to row back to safety as the Germans closed in.

Back in Plymouth, John was involved in boarding FS *Mistral*, to put it out of action. The French crew had started to scuttle the vessel and John had to put a loaded revolver to the Captain's head to save the ship. The *Galatea* was also involved in the two days' chase before the *Bismarck* was sunk. For the next year, he was at sea constantly running the Russian convoys to Murmansk. His action-station was below 15 inches of armour plate in the ship's bowels and, he recalled, the temperature in his cabin never rose above 50 degrees Fahrenheit.