

A tribute to Dad by David Leal-Bennett

Keith (Wiggy) Bennett

3rd June 1921 – 20th December 2006



I wanted you to all know a little about Dad, particularly his early years – he was a loving husband, father and grandfather - a family man, a proud man.

He was the youngest son of 14 children (4 boys and 10 girls) sandwiched between three older and five younger sisters. He would joke that he joined the navy to escape. The truth was, that he adored them all and was idolized by his 5 younger sisters. Not only was it his sisters who followed him around the house but also his hand full of pet ducks.

Chloris, Dad's youngest sister, wrote to me and I quote – "When I was fourteen, I had to change schools and walk 3 miles to school. Keith was home on leave and walked with me and held my arm and hand all the way there. I was so proud to be with my big brother."

This large family by present day standards provided a strict but loving childhood.

He joined the Navy's training school, HMS St Vincent, when he was 13. There he endured a very hard introduction into the pre-war navy. The Navy was to become his life for the next 20 years. Whilst it was tough he saw the world and had many happy memories.

He joined the battleship, HMS Barham, in 1939 and saw action in the Atlantic, Arctic and the Mediterranean. HMS Barham was

torpedoed off Scotland in December 1939. This experience probably saved his life a couple of years later.

Whilst in the Mediterranean, his ship was involved the sinking of the Italian fleet at the battle of Matapan, as well as the evacuation of Crete and the bombing of Tripoli. These were just a few of the many experiences he never forgot.

He was one of the last survivors of the sinking, in the Eastern Mediterranean, of the battleship 'HMS Barham' the largest warship lost to a U-boat.

Shortly after 4:00pm on 25th November 1941 Dad was 4 decks down when there were thuds as the Barham was hit by torpedoes. He, from his earlier experience, immediately recognised these sounds. Whilst others doubted the significance of the thuds, Dad did not! He shouted "fish" (the term used for torpedoes) and was off! As the ship lurched to her port side Dad, with his best mate Ted, ran up the ladders to the deck. Clambering onto the now listing starboard side, he climbed over the torpedo bulges, which were covered in sharp barnacles. Badly cut he managed to dive in the water at the very moment the ship's magazine exploded. The sinking had taken only four minutes and out of a crew of over 1300 only 400 survived.

He was badly injured but did recover, if you can ever recover from such an experience.

After a posting to America, for recuperation, he returned to Portsmouth and made contact with Mum whom he had met previously when he was training several years earlier. She was a nurse in Portsmouth and lived on the Isle of Wight. A romance followed, and he joked that he chased her all over the island until he caught her.

Now this was not that far from the truth, because during the war, travel was restricted. This did not seem to phase Dad. He somehow, using his enterprise, managed to forge a Lieutenant Commander's signature on a pass, so giving him unlimited travel to the IOW. In fact he was so well known that his pass became superfluous, Dad simply being saluted through. This paid off, and after the war in Europe, on 26th May 1945, they were married,

had a three day honeymoon, and then Dad had to return to his ship and was off to the Far East.

He was to stay in the Navy for longer than he had originally intended because of the Korean War and I remember Pete and I saying goodbye to him at the Navy dockyard gate in Portsmouth. At the Coronation, we also remember he dressed up as a pirate for the street party – we took some convincing that he was our Dad!

He told us many tales of his time in the Navy, and I would like recall just one, please bear in mind that this was during the war. Whilst briefly in port, he and his shipmates met up with some American sailors who were, shall we say, not too complimentary about the Brits. Rather than get into a brawl they just drank the Yanks under the table – they then took the ringleader down to the tattoo bar and on his chest had tattooed "Rule Britannia".

When he left the navy we moved from Portsmouth to Weymouth, and then onto Bath and the Admiralty, where he was involved in the design of the cruiser HMS Tiger. We all remember visiting the ship just before her maiden voyage. In Bath many friends were made and he was a church warden and on the PCC, he also managed to go to night school and gained the HNC.

In spite of all his work he was a committed family man, and we always used to go for a walk every Sunday afternoon. He also taught us to swim and we would go regularly every Saturday morning.

His new job with ICL took us to Hitchin. The house they bought was in need of complete renovation, so Dad would commute home at weekends and work on it during the evenings, before we all moved up to Hitchin to join him.

Wherever we lived he was closely involved with the church and the community, and he joined the PCC at St. Mary's Hitchin; he also became a Councillor and was Chairman of the Spastics Society.

It's the little things you remember - when he had taught us to dive at the 'new' pool in Stevenage he showed us how – climbing to the top board he did a perfect Swallow dive; we were amazed

and very proud of our Dad. He then told us that he had dived off the side of a ship in the Bay of Biscay! Apparently on one occasion it was so calm that the captain stopped the ship and invited the crew to go for a swim. No Health & Safety issues in those days.

When he retired they moved to Ashwell, and as Grandpas do he made his grandchildren a farm, and a large train which needed pushing around – it was three feet high! He taught us many things over the years, how to strip down an engine, how to decorate, put up fences and do electrics. In the navy they call them Jacks because they can lend a hand to anything.

When we were younger we used to take things apart and Dad would help us put them back together. More recently the role was reversed, and I often had a call from Mum to sort out something that Dad had started, and we would repair it together.

In his latter years he felt more able to talk about his wartime experiences. He became a member of the HMS Barham Association and just over a year ago we went to the annual service of remembrance at Westminster Abbey. Up until then this had been too painful. He was really please to meet some of his fellow shipmates. He was hoping to go again in November but sadly this was not to be.

Last May, Pete and I travelled to Portsmouth with him for the final reunion dinner, only 9 survivors were able to attend. We had a really good day and attended church in the Navy dockyard the following Sunday morning. At this moving service a poem was read which brought back many memories for him; you will hear this shortly.

We his children have much to thank Keith for; he instilled in us the principles of hard work and self-discipline that have served us well in life.

We will remember him as a gentle, loving and proud husband, father and grandfather who was always prepared to help others; We all miss him so very much.