

# Goodbye Uncle Jack

*by* Steve Finan

He's gone now, a man so strong he lived 68 years after his own death.

My brothers and I were raised on tales of Jack the bully-conqueror, Jack the athlete, Jack the champion boxer. Jack was seven feet tall. He could pull up trees, he had muscles of iron and his glance cowed hard men and made women swoon. Jack never did a mean thing. He gave all his pay to his mother. He would have been a successful businessman.

You should, all of you, grow up to be like Uncle Jack. His smile was the summer sun. He loved fair play. He laughed all the time and swung his little sister up on to his broad shoulders.

Jack was 19 when the war started, 12 years older than my mother. He volunteered immediately and became a Royal Navy man. They paraded through the town the day they went off to war. Jack kept the northern route open to Russia. He fought off the U-boat packs in the Atlantic — one hand on the tiller, one on the torpedo launch button. Jack once had to kick Nazis off the deck because the sub couldn't take prisoners and it was time to dive. He didn't choose to do it, but it was war. And they were Nazis after all.

Jack didn't make it. The attrition rate for submariners was high. He died just after D-Day, the worst day of my mother's life. But his legend survived. Reward was to be described as 'brave as Jack' if we could keep from crying when our childhood scrapes were tended. Jack's feats became greater the longer he was dead. He could outrun trains (my mother had been watching a Superman film). He once straightened a horseshoe (she'd seen 'The World's Strongest Man' TV show).

Once the Internet made such research easy, I traced the history of Jack's sub. Its story was to be a present for my mother. But I found that Jack went down in the Bay of Biscay, the victim of a terrible friendly fire incident. An American plane mistook his sub as a Nazi threat to Allied shipping and depth-charged her. I never told my

mother this, but always wondered if she knew anyway and it was a secret we were keeping from each other. I did the USA a favour. It may be the most powerful nation on earth, but that wouldn't have saved it from my mother's ire.

Too stubborn and too Scottish to go in time to see about that lump in her stomach, my mother died on a windy day in March. Become tiny, she fought hard, declaring she'd eat all the food she was given and this would make her strong again. That's what Jack would have done.

There are no words powerful enough to tell how that last cry of feisty defiance moves me.

She swore she'd walk out of that hospice, she swore she 'wasn't going to be beaten by this thing'.

But she didn't walk out.

Now no one alive remembers the colossus that was her eldest brother. A man I knew all my life, but never met. I've lost them both. Rest in peace, Jack. You never knew how much you made me try my best.

