

WARTIME LETTERS OF LOVE AND LOSS

EXCLUSIVE

By Caroline Cecil Bose



THE early hours of Saturday, May 16, 1942 at RAF Sullom Voe in the remote Shetland Islands, a Royal Air Force Catalina flying boat of 210 Squadron took off for another grueling 18-hour mission. A year after Hitler's invasion of Russia, 210 Squadron's job was to provide reconnaissance reports along the coast of Occupied Norway to help protect Allied convoys to Murmansk. Catalina AH535/J, piloted by 25-year-old Flight Lieutenant Robert Keddie, would patrol to the west of Trondheim Fjord. Having been transferred by dinghy, the mooring was slipped and the Catalina taxied towards the take-off spot. With the engines at full throttle, she threw up a waterfall of spray as she took off and was soon cruising at 100 knots.

Radio silence was enforced when they reached their patrol area off the coast of Trondheim to begin flying circuits. At 17.39 hours, the crew requested a forecast for landing back at base.

At 18.04 hours, RAF Sullom Voe called back but received no reply. The aircraft was never found and her crew were reported missing in action. Diana, née Ladner, the love of Bob Keddie's life, who was four months' pregnant with their child, kept the letters, diaries, sketches and poems he'd sent over the previous two years. Hers to him were lost. But that surviving correspondence, collected in my new book, tells the poignant yet joyous tale of their love – a story that is both unique and, in its example of tremendous sacrifice and loss, characteristic of their noble generation.

Born in Essex on January 14, 1917, Bob Keddie trained as an accountant before enlisting in the RAF Volunteer Reserve on October 2, 1939. In March 1940, aged 23, he joined a party of friends to see the Beggar's Opera in London.

BOB'S DIARY, MARCH, 1940

A girl called Diana was there. She has a fascinating face. I didn't get a chance to talk to her... oh blast, you fool, you will only get burnt. Is there no such thing as a hardened heart? Let her pass while you can... but a voice inside says she may and she might and if you don't...

Bob's diary, April

Life's a game, but a serious one, there shall be but one wife for me. Pretty certain it's Diana. I wish ten thousand times I'd never met her; she's ruined my peace of mind for what seems like eternity.

To Bob's joy, 19-year-old Diana, an aspiring actress, lived with her parents outside Chelmsford in Essex, only about 10 miles from Bob's home in Downham. Soon, the pair were writing.

Letter, April 23: Downham

12am. Dear Diana, Must write tonight, now, midnight. It is quite still, no breath of wind, no rustle from the elms. Even the house has hushed its creaks and waits. I can feel the night – warm, soft – drawing me out: off with the lights and softly pull the curtain, lean out and I, too, wait. The musty-sweet smell of earth and new-mown grass comes up to greet me... thank you for your letter and putting up with this (if you've got so far)... Can you and [Diana's

sister] Jean make tea Friday? Come early: I'll ride and meet you.

Bob's diary, April

Glorious, glorious day, oh! for some more like that. We went up the river against the tide with the jib furled back to catch the sun. Diana leant against my knees. I would have given a lot to be able to stroke her hair or lay my hand on her shoulder, to talk through touch and feeling.

Bob started his RAF training at Padgate, near Warrington, on May 22. By now Hitler's blitzkrieg had seen the Nazis invade Holland, Belgium and France.

Bob's diary, May

Am I afraid? I think so a little, not of personal injury, of losing a leg or being hurt and in pain, perhaps not even death. I think too I am a little thrilled at going, proud of myself in spite of myself. Asked myself to tea with Diana and spent a pleasant afternoon picking primroses. She attracts me more than I like to admit and can make my blood run hot and my heart jump right out, leaving an empty longing behind.

Letter: May 20, Downham

This is the third or fourth attempt to write and it must be the last – I shall soon run out of paper. I should like to send you pages filled with the thoughts and hopes and ambitions of my heart, yet it is a part of me quite gone and I cannot find the accustomed spate of words... Look after yourself, don't give in to this world and write to me if you feel depressed – in writing you'll find comfort. My love to you, you've made me very happy.

Letter, May 23, Padgate

Today we continued our delightful pastime of doing nothing until after lunch. We were then issued with kit and uniform. The latter is definitely scratchy and the pants are a real delight to the eyes... Oh, Diana, when shall I see you again?... When we move, I'll try and telephone: at the moment we can't go out and no telephone here. Altogether uncivilised. Lights just going out. I'll think of you and you, just you. Your eyes.

Letter, May 25, Padgate

The handwriting will be worse than ever tonight. Vaccination and two inoculations yesterday. Very stiff last night and today. Thoughts like grasshoppers today... leave is somewhere in the hazy distance. Told yesterday that all weekend passes stopped until September.

On May 29, 1940, Bob arrived in Hastings, East Sussex, at No 5 Initial Training Wing. The evacuation of the British Expeditionary Force from Dunkirk had started on May 26.

Diana's diary: June 1

I think I want to marry Bob. I know we are suited, I know I like him as a man. Am I in love? I think I am but I wish I could see him again to be certain... The men are getting out from Dunkirk and Flanders. How many people's lives are being destroyed? Life is passing fast and here I am wasting my precious days wishing them to pass so...

Bob's diary: June 5

Letter from Diana and phoned her tonight.

HAPPY TIMES: Diana Ladner with her dogs



Ahead of the 80th anniversary of VE Day next month, our exclusive two-part serial featuring the correspondence between a young RAF officer and his fiancée brings home the joyous highs and aching lows of the Second World War

My cup is full: I have not deserved so much – it can't last: yet it must: it will. Letter – more poetry straight from her heart I know: Diana you turn me inside out. I could, I do live my past again with you. Diana, and say it again, softly, Diana, Diana, la petite Diane, Diane, Diana... a world in a name.

Letter, June 14, RAF St Leonards

One nasty blow tonight. The sergeant of the guard tells us that all leave in the RAF is cancelled till further notice... A bit tough – we're the only service with that regulation. Damn and blast it. I can almost imagine them doing it to me on purpose – curse them!

Diana's diary, June 18

11.30pm. Written during an air raid. The house shudders, there are explosions. My

blackout board falls on top of me. Aeroplane drone. Air raid sirens wail. Don't feel afraid, horribly calm and interested. Seems very minor... France negotiating. Churchill's speech. Mummy and Daddy decide to evacuate me to Plymouth.

Diana's diary, June, 26

Memories of yesterday. Dressing for Bob, washing for Bob, making up for Bob, catching the bus for Bob. The extraordinary feelings and anxiety of the long bus drive from Plymouth, change at Totnes. Arrived at Torquay. Time seemed to stand still... Hundreds of RAF. Fear of not recognising him... Came out and walking up to me was Bob. Took his hand in silence, walked and walked in silence. Gradually spoke of this and that. Climbed down to a little beach. Stayed there till eight lying on the rocks.

STAR-CROSSED LOVERS: RAF pilot Bob Keddie with wife-to-be Diana in 1940

Crew Picture: BILL BALDERSON



EYES IN THE SKY: An RAF Catalina flying boat, above; below, Bob, seated centre, and his crew at Sullom Voe, Scotland in 1942



Don't miss tomorrow's Sunday Express for the concluding part of We've All Life Before Us

The blue sea, gulls, clouds, jagged grey cliffs, rocks and Bob and I and we loved each other. Please God let us have life together and know the fullness of a "happy married life", please, soon.

Diana's diary, July 1

Bob came on Saturday to tea. Back home to supper. Talk absurdly and cried. Pain in my throat and heart almost past bearing. Run to bus. Pain. Bob got on bus alone. Alone. Walked back to nearby place – saw bus coming, couldn't watch.

Letter, July 3, Torquay

8.30pm. My dear. We've just heard 50 of our squadron are going to Rhodesia at the end of the month – I'm not one of them. Am I glad or am I sad?... I don't know what it would mean to be going, what it means staying behind and where we shall be

posted to.... Shall have to stop, people in this room are rioting and making a hell of a row (excuse the language). Goodnight darling Diana Constance.

Letter: July 19, Monktonhead, Scotland

Have No Fear of this flying business, dear, we always wear parachutes anyhow! Nobody has been killed here for a very long time – it has the reputation of being one of the safest training schools and the best... 8.30pm. After such a lovely morning it gradually clouded over and has rained off and on all afternoon. Went solo today for my first time since I've been here – a year's absence has not improved my flying! It's a grand thrill alone and in sole control – feeling of freedom and away from everyone – littleness of the world... I rigidly banish you from my mind when in the air... Flying round an aerodrome with sometimes 20 or 30 other machines in the air demands all one's concentration.

Letter, July 22, Monktonhead

No letter from you this morning. I thought it was hoping for too much. You shouldn't spoil me so because, when I don't get a letter nearly every day, I get bad tempered... I cannot, dare not, think what I shall or can say to your father when I write. Will he submit to losing his second daughter and at the age of 19?

Diana's diary, July 22

Started my wartime work. A week of school. Take 36 boys and girls for everything – ages between five and seven. Sometimes I hate it, sometimes I love it. The children are rather sweet. Love of Bob fills every minute of the day and floods and overwhelms me.

Letter, July 25, Monktonhead

My darling, posted letters to you and Mother and Dad tonight: I feel so happy that they are quite content, or at any rate in no way opposed to us...

Unfinished draft letter to Diana's father, August 1, Monktonhead

Dear Mr Ladner, I can find no better way to start this letter than to ask you outright if you will part with your other daughter, Diana, and give your consent to our engagement and marriage. It will be hard, I know, for you and Mrs Ladner to lose her, but is she not, in part, lost already? When I pass out in a few months' time as a qualified pilot my pay will be sufficient for us to live on with a squeeze, but that squeeze should do us more good than harm.

Letter, August 5, Monktonhead

Five minutes ago I was lying on my bed reading your "tear-stained" letter... and just then the maid knocked on the door: "There's a young lady on the telephone for you." I shot my feet into my slippers and rushed downstairs. "Hullo, hullo," couldn't hear a thing, then very faint – "I am speaking for Diana Ladner,"... "her father...?", "her father?" "Yes, her father rang up today and says 'yes'."

● Edited extract by Matt Nixon from We've All Life Before Us: A Love Story of the Second World War, by Caroline Cecil Bose (Fonthill, £29.99)

