
From Foes to Friends: The Ring, the Rescue, and the Extraordinary Legacy of the *Silver Line*

An historical account of Silver Line and the Watkinson family of Filey

On the afternoon of **3 April 1940**, the waters off the Yorkshire coast became the stage for a historic, high-stakes clash. What began as a standard fishing trip for the Scarborough steam drifter ***Silver Line***—**co-owned and crewed by the Watkinson brothers**—ended in an unprecedented wartime dogfight, a double rescue, and a lifelong bond that defied the bitterness of war.

A Historic Clash in the Skies

The *Silver Line* was working the fishing grounds 15 miles northeast of Whitby when a German **Heinkel He 111 medium bomber** (belonging to Luftwaffe unit *Stab II./KG 26*) roared overhead. The bomber, piloted by **Leutnant Rudolf Gustav-Adolf Behnisch**, was intercepted by Flight Lieutenant **Edgar Norman Ryder** of RAF No. 41 Squadron, flying a **Spitfire Mk Ia**.

In the fierce dogfight that followed, Ryder severely damaged the Heinkel. However, the German crew successfully returned fire, setting the Spitfire's engine ablaze. Forced to ditch into the freezing sea, Ryder miraculously fought his way out of his sinking cockpit—becoming the **first pilot in history to survive ditching an RAF Spitfire**. He was pulled from the water by a nearby Grimsby trawler, the *Alaska*.

The Watkinson Brothers Defend Their Boat

As the crippled Heinkel skimmed low over the water, it crossed directly into the path of the *Silver Line*. Defending their vessel, the crew manned their newly equipped Lewis machine gun and opened fire.

They scored at least **ten direct hits**, further disabling the aircraft and wounding the observer, Lt. Georg Kempe, in the leg. With its engines failing, Behnisch was forced to crash-land the heavy bomber into the sea right near the drifter.

Humanity on the High Seas

Though they had just been in active combat, the crew immediately shifted from enemies to rescuers. Under the command of **Skipper Bill (William) Watkinson**, the fishermen hauled all **five German airmen**—including Pilot Rudolf Behnisch and his commanding officer, Oberstlt Hans Hefe—out of the water and onto their deck.

In a moment of profound gratitude amid the terror of capture, one of the Germans handed **First Mate Bob Watkinson a precious gold ring** as a thank-you for saving their lives. He said he would return after the war and thank him again. The *Silver Line* immediately turned around and raced back to port, landing the wounded flyer at Scarborough Hospital and the others at the local police station. For their immense bravery and humanity, the Watkinson crew was officially recognized and awarded medals.

The Torpedo Rumour and a Miracle Survival

As the war progressed, the Watkinson family heard a tragic rumour: the ship transferring their rescued Germans to a POW camp in the United States had been torpedoed and sunk in the Atlantic, and the men had drowned. But the story did not end there. Rudolf Behnisch had survived the war.

Decades later, an aviation historian writing an article about the historic dogfight tracked down Behnisch in Germany. Learning that the family of the fishermen who saved him was still in Yorkshire, a meeting was arranged between the German pilot and Bob Watkinson's son, also called Bob.

Returning the Ring

When Rudolf Behnisch arrived to meet the son of the man who pulled him from the North Sea, he was met with a remarkable gesture of integrity: **the Watkinson family returned his gold ring to him**.

Overwhelmed by the enduring kindness of the family, Behnisch brought treasures from Germany for everyone. Among those gifts were **Swiss Army knives**, handed to Bob Watkinson's two grandsons (Peter and John)—a token of peace from a pilot who, but for the humanity of a handful of Scarborough fishermen, would have been lost to the sea.

Postscript

Peter became a fisherman himself and his first boat was a Trawler which he named Silverline. She operated out of Scarborough and then Bridlington. As trawling became unsustainable Peter successfully changed to potting for crabs and lobsters from Bridlington and is now retired. John was a teacher and used the Silverline story in school assemblies.