

Jon Pertwee: From secret agent in WWII to Dr Who

A NEWLY-released tape recording of actor Jon Pertwee, best known for playing the debonair Time Lord, has revealed his clandestine life as a senior intelligence officer during WWII.

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HE was, for many fans, the greatest Doctor Who of them all. The actor Jon Pertwee, who played the intrepid Time Lord from 1970 to 1974, is fondly remembered for the flamboyance and enthusiasm he gave to the role as well as for his sartorial elegance.

Yet what was not known until now is that Pertwee, famous for fighting against the Daleks on TV, was a secret agent during the Second World War. The March edition of Doctor Who Magazine, as part of its celebration of 50 years of the iconic programme, has published for the first time in its entirety a remarkable tape-recorded interview which took place at Pertwee's London home in 1994, just two years before his death at the age of 76.

He had never before talked publicly about his wartime role for fear of breaching the Official Secrets Act but did loosen up to Matt Adams and David Southwell, two reporters from a local newspaper. The actor revealed that during his time working in Naval intelligence he would attend meetings "where Churchill would be at the end of the table and he would be smoking his cigars".

“The team I worked with, the brothers in intelligence, were an amazing collection of characters,” he recalled. “There was a huge range of talents all being used to protect the security of the nation, often in some very surprising ways.”

Pertwee taught commandos how to use ingenious gadgets. “Compasses in brass buttons, secret maps in white cotton handkerchiefs, which only showed up when you urinated on them. Pipes you could smoke that also fired a .22 bullet. All sorts of incredible things. Now that suited me perfectly as I have always loved gadgets.” If it all sounds a bit James Bondish that’s not surprising as Ian Fleming, Bond’s creator, was a colleague of Pertwee’s.

One day he sent Pertwee for an interview for a job. The authorities were looking for a French speaker. Pertwee, whose family was of French descent, spoke the language well, but thinking the job involved being a liaison with the Free French, he “deliberately messed up the interview” by pretending not to understand the questions and “throwing in the most inappropriate words” in his answers. Later Pertwee confessed to Fleming that he had done it as he didn’t want to work with what he called “De Gaulle’s mob”.



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“He (Fleming) then told me I was a blithering idiot because the interview was for the chance to be our man in Tahiti!”

Churchill and Fleming were not the only famous people who Pertwee encountered during his time in intelligence. His tea boy was an able seaman called Jim Callaghan, who in 1976, became British prime minister. "Can you imagine it, he declared. "I used to have a prime minister as my tea boy."

Before Pertwee became a secret agent he had sailed on Arctic convoys. "I was in Russian convoys which everyone now says was one of the toughest jobs in the war, 85ft high seas and cold like you cannot believe. It was bloody tough. My job was as a spotter high up in the spotting top. It was terrifying." He served on HMS Hood but was transferred just before the battle cruiser was sunk by Bismarck in 1941. "It saved my life," he said. "Of the 1,418 crew, only three survived.

Everyone thought I was dead."

THERE were other lucky escapes too, like the time he was on leave with shipmates in London and there was an air-raid warning. "I had a premonition and went into the underground station to take shelter but my shipmates wanted to get home to loved ones. Next morning I made my way back to my barracks, horrified by the damage done during the attack. I was the only one who got back to barracks. All of my mates had been killed during the bombing. All of them."

From an early age he had been someone who had always done his own thing regardless of the consequences. As a child he was expelled from a series of private schools. He was made to leave one prep school for swinging on the lavatory chains like Tarzan. He was also thrown out of RADA despite the fact that his father, the eminent playwright Roland Pertwee, was a governor.



“Even when I got some success, my first big part as a juvenile lead in the West End in *To Kill A Cat*, I got kicked out of that, despite the fact that my father wrote it,” he later recalled.

Appropriately enough given his naval background, Pertwee first came to national

prominence when he starred in the popular radio comedy *The Navy Lark*, a programme in which his wonderful talent for comic voices could be deployed to full effect. He was the first choice of comedy producer David Croft to play Captain Mainwaring in *Dad's Army* but he turned down the role. Had he accepted it's unlikely he would have been offered the part of Doctor Who just over a year later.

With his velvet cape and cane and frilly shirts, to say nothing of his great mane of white hair, he was a stylish Time Lord.

After his spell as the Doctor he hosted the game show *Whodunnit* then appeared as the scarecrow *Worzel Gummidge* in another popular children's series. But while some found him an engaging companion others saw him as egotistical and difficult to work with.

"Jon Pertwee was an insufferable know-all. He was very knowledgeable, very clever, but he didn't wear it lightly. He always knew better than you did," said Tom Baker, who succeeded him as Doctor Who. He also had a reputation for being mean with money. "I loved Jon dearly but he did find it very hard sometimes to shout a round," his Doctor Who co-star Katy Manning recalled.

Pertwee came across as an avuncular figure when interviewed on television but off screen he could be forbidding. "Although we have gone on to quiz Oscar winners and meet prime ministers, no interview was ever more daunting than coming face to face with our Doctor," recall Adams and Southwell.

He was certainly a complex character. "He was a lot more insecure than anyone would believe of a 6ft 3in guy smothered in tattoos," his actor son Sean has said. "He did so much in his life."

It is only now, as the extent of Jon Pertwee's secret war-time activities are revealed, do we realise just how much.

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