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ISSUE 12, MAY 2013

NEWSLETTER



Since the Issue of July 2009 (number 4), this front page has carried two or three photographs which provide, over time, a record of all the Coastal Forces Classes of boats ordered by the RN from the time of World War I onwards. The last three Classes ordered up to the end of World War II are shown here in this Issue. Of the 25 shown so far only two are still represented by actual restored boats, namely the 68ft Vosper MTB 102 at Wroxham, and the 72ft Fairmile HDML 1387 (*Medusa*) at Gosport. Both provide splendid examples of enthusiastic initiatives in saving these craft so that succeeding generations can see at first hand the reality of the navy's "little ships". Both hope to be at Southampton's Maritime Festival on 5/6 May. Readers will now be pleased to learn of a new project to restore the 63ft British Power Boat, MASB 27, which is now at Watchet, in Somerset, alongside the restored post-war FPB, HMS *Gay Archer*. It goes without saying that anything readers can do to support these projects will be warmly welcomed by those concerned.



TOP LEFT MTB 1943 British Power Boat 71ft 6in

TOP RIGHT MTB 1943 Camper & Nicholson 117ft

ABOVE MTB 1943 Vosper 73ft

Newsletters by e-mail? Please see item in the Notice Board section.

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CHAIRMAN'S LETTER

On behalf of the Trustees and myself, once again I write to express our gratitude for your unwavering support over the years. Every donation we receive, whether large or small, is much appreciated and enables us to keep going towards achieving our eventual aim of seeing a permanent memorial exhibition to Coastal Forces within the impending enlargement of the National Museum of the Royal Navy at Portsmouth.

As you know, our Newsletter is supported by these donations rather than by subscription, because we prefer to leave it to you, our readers, to decide how much is reasonable. However, as your Chairman, it is my duty to remind everyone that there is still a quite sizeable minority who have not yet made any contribution. As printing and postage costs continue to grow, we need your contributions now, more than ever.

Meanwhile, the future plans for our exhibition are at last looking promising. Shortly it will be important for us to back the National Museum when their major fundraising begins, and so we must keep our Trust viable over the immediate next few years. It follows that if you have not so far contributed, or indeed can afford a little more, I and my fellow Trustees would be eternally grateful.

Finally, I have to report some changes to the Board of Trustees. Michael Gotelee has retired and deserves our grateful thanks for his valuable contribution over the last eleven years. He has kindly offered to continue to provide legal advice for us in the future. Another son of a distinguished World War II Dog boat CO, Miles Robinson, has joined us and we also welcome, as a Trustee this time, Captain Trevor Robotham, our ex-Director.

DIRECTOR'S REPORT

If you have visited Portsmouth Historic Dockyard recently, you will have seen the extensive building works to extend the museum along the ground floor of Storehouse 10 (on the left before you get to Victory) These new galleries are going to be very impressive, telling the Royal Navy's story from 1900 to the present day. In fact, this has been a very successful programme and the Coastal Forces Heritage Trust can benefit greatly from being affiliated and closely involved with the National Museum of the Royal Navy; we are getting valuable advice on such matters as fund raising, major grant applications, acquisition of historic items and exhibition planning.

The Trust has just acquired an excellent new computer programme which will greatly assist us with our financial management and record keeping. In essence, we are streamlining our organisation. I take this opportunity to thank all our donors but we have an important obligation to do all we can to keep our overheads to a minimum, run an efficient organisation and never lose sight of our core aim of working with the National Museum of the Royal Navy to establish our own exhibition. So the bottom line is, as always, we can do nothing without your support and for this, we thank you once again.

BOATS ROUNDUP

MTB 102

After a winter slipped and under cover, the boat has had a complete sand-down and re-paint, the gun's rubbers renewed, and some repairs following the damage caused by the argument with a submerged container last summer. She expects to be back in the water in April before going to Southampton for 5/6 May. Thereafter the season's programme includes:

25/27 May	Ipswich for ADLS Commemorative Cruise.
8/9 June	Brightlingsea Boat Show.
15/16 June	Brundall for Brundall & Blofield Sea Scouts Centenary.
6/7 July	Medway River Festival.
7/8 September	Great Yarmouth Maritime Festival.
14/15 September	Thames Festival at St Katharines Dock.



MTB 102

HDML 1387 (MEDUSA).

As you can see, the boat had an exciting time recently participating in a TV advert for champagne, for which she had special permission to fly a white ensign. Still based at Haslar Marina, she will attend the Southampton Maritime Festival on 5-6 May. Later in the year she will as usual be at the Southampton Boat Show in September and at Hornet for Remembrance Sunday. The boat celebrates the 70th anniversary of her launching in October and plans are in hand to mark this very special occasion with a suitable party. Anyone interested should check the website at www.hmsmedusa.org.uk



Medusa



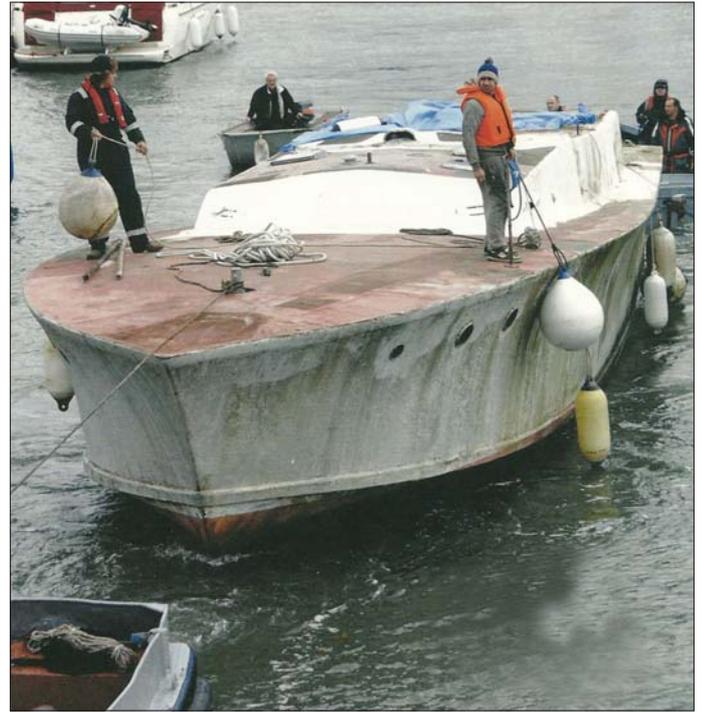
MASB 27 at Falmouth 1943

MASB 27

Now sharing a 'stable' at Watchet with *Gay Archer*, this boat has just been acquired by Paul Child's son, Owen, who intends to restore her after a safe but pretty eventful road journey from Swanwick to Somerset in the midst of last winter's foul weather.

Bought out of the disposal pool in Poole harbour (sorry!) in 1945, she became home to the well-known musician Max Jaffa until the mid 1980s. Reputedly bought by a Russian businessman with ideas of luxury yachting, by 1988 she had passed into the hands of photo-journalist Jonathan Eastland who, re-naming her *'Moonlight'*, converted her into his family home and they lived aboard on the Hamble river for some 24 years before her sale to the Childs family last year.

The boat was built by the British Powerboat Company early in the war and commissioned into the RN in 1941. But these



MASB 27 towed away for restoration 2013

craft were not ideally suited to A/S work and MASB 27, along with others of her class, were converted for air sea rescue work. (see the item in the November 2011 Issue) Later in the war she is reported to have been involved in clandestine operations off the French coast and, finally, took part in the Normandy landings as a navigational leader onto the American beaches.

SUPPORTERS' CORNER & FEEDBACK

SWEEPING FOR OMAHA BEACH

All the way from Manitoba, Canada comes word from another member of the crew of ML 143, present when the flotilla completed the inshore sweeping for the American landings at Omaha beach (see the last Issue page 12). The Rev Canon James Whitford writes:

"It was a pleasant surprise to read Darryl Stirling's article. He adds: On return to harbour we were met with a tremendous air raid as brutal as any over London earlier in the war. We can hardly be blamed for thinking that Jerry had discovered the Operation Neptune scheme. We returned to sea the next day – it was just as blowy.....but we had been well prepared for any eventuality. I cannot remember any undue apprehension, it was just another job. With all good wishes and kindest regards for awakening past events."

And the very same to you Canon Whitford.

FATHERS & SONS

One of the most enjoyable aspects of the Coastal Forces fraternity is the feeling of belonging to a family with the common background of having a connection with all those who have spent time in the Navy's Coastal Forces. It becomes most obvious when attending a special event – a plaque dedication, a re-union, a dinner or, especially, the Remembrance Day Service at Hornet. And perhaps this is why there are so many examples of father & son within this community. The connection between each generation is real and tangible, as evidenced by the number of WWII veterans' sons who are CFHT Trustees and the many family turn-outs at Hornet each November, some even covering three generations. Within this family are many examples of sons who followed their fathers into either the RN or the Royal Naval Reserves, sometimes both being lucky enough to serve in Coastal Forces.

Within this fellowship the Sayer family may be unique. Captain Geoffrey Sayer, whose passing is

recorded in this Newsletter, was the son of Vice Admiral Sir Guy Sayer, who was Senior Officer of the very first 1st MTB Flotilla, commissioned in 1937 when he was a Lieutenant Commander. They are believed to be the only

Father & Son who were both RN and who both served in Coastal Forces. (And by a curious co-incidence both are referred to within this newsletter.) If you know of any others please let the Trust know.

NOTICE BOARD

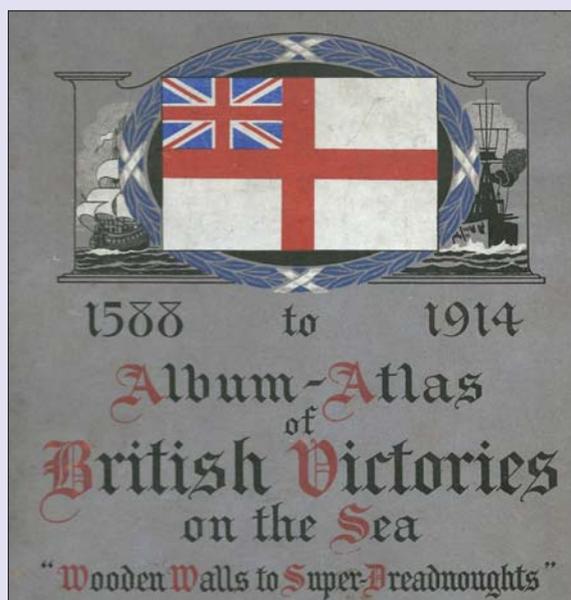
ONE HUNDRED YEARS ON

Extracts from an ancient Album-Atlas now in the CFHT Library provides food for thought as the year 2013 begins. A conversation at the last Hornet dinner remarked that the 14 boats of today's 1st Patrol Boat Squadron comprise about one quarter of the surface sea-going strength of the Royal Navy today, at least in number of ships. Published in London a century ago, when a certain Winston S. Churchill had just become First Lord of the Admiralty, this hard-back booklet listed, under the heading "The Navies of the World", the following surface ship numbers of the then British Empire:-

	Built	Building
Battleships Armoured	60	15
Battle Cruisers	9	1
Cruisers	9	0
Light Cruisers	94	9
Torpedo Boat Destroyers	232	16
Torpedo Boats	109	0

– involving a total manpower in excess of 150,000.

With thanks to Don Rogers



MTB 358 with ROTET aerial

ROTET – INFORMATION SOUGHT

Known to be fitted only in a number of boats which ran out of Dover or Ramsgate, this radar equipment apparently assisted shore radar operators to identify whether echoes in the Dover Straits area were friend or foe. Little is known of the details of this IFF device except a brief reference to it in a (paraphrased) action report of 26/7 September 1943 involving three Dutch boats and three MGBs from the 9th MGB Flotilla of 71ft 6 BPB boats:-

“..the action was fought outside the range of shore-based radar and in consequence, due to enemy minefields, there was risk to our craft who were in doubt as to their position. Had they been fitted with ROTET, assistance could have been given...” A footnote added “*ROTET – a device to increase the range of shore-based radar.*” Cdr Christopher Dreyer DSO DSC RN, who was SO MTBs at Dover in 1942/3, referred to this equipment later as being fitted only in Dover based craft and “*enabling the shore radar plot to distinguish who was who*”, and that “*the aerial could be set to rotate at five, ten or twenty revs per minute.*”

Photographs of the day usually had the aerial censored, but CF historian Geoffrey Hudson has this picture of MTB 358 clearly showing the V-shaped equipment on its own mast. Anyone who knows more about this special equipment is requested to get in touch with Cdr Rupert Head in the CFHT office – contact details on the back page.

DO YOU WANT THE NEWSLETTERS TO BE AVAILABLE BY E-MAIL?

A suggestion has been made to make the CFHT newsletters available via e-mail, if enough supporters so wish. It is of course already available on the Trust's website at www.coastal-forces.org.uk Before introducing this change it is therefore necessary to test the market, so will anyone interested who wishes to receive it this way please let the office know- preferably by e-mail at rheadcoastalforces@msn.com

This could also become a useful avenue to increase the newsletter circulation in general. So, as well as letting us know if you would like it by e-mail, please also tell us of the e-mail addresses of anyone else you feel would be interested in having a copy. If there are sufficient takers the addition will be made for the next (November 2013) Issue.

CFOA HORNET DINNER

The CFOA Dinner will be at Hornet Sailing Club on Saturday 9 November this year, before the annual Service of Remembrance on the following day. It has been agreed that wives of members without whose assistance the member cannot attend are warmly invited to come. Please let Peter Cunningham (02392 589731 or peter.cunningham789@btinternet.com) know if you wish to add anyone to the list of invitations, which will be sent out in September.

QUICK QUIZ

It may be a tenuous link but it *is* there:-

Can anyone spot the connection between the raid on St Nazaire in 1942 and the 2008 film MAMMA MIA?

MAKING HISTORY

OPERATION CHARIOT

With little good war news during the whole of 1940, Churchill had identified the need to carry the war to the enemy wherever and whenever the opportunity occurred. The intention was to prove that in spite of the country's defensive situation, this campaign would show how her offensive spirit remained unbroken, and that her morale remained high. Maintaining such a threat would also oblige the enemy to stretch his defences over what was now a very long coastline. And so the Combined Operations Directorate was born, led from October 1941 by Commodore Lord Louis Mountbatten, or CCO (Chief of Combined Operations) as the title became known. Its importance may be judged by the fact that CCO had direct access to the Chiefs of Staff Committee.

The strategic value of the vast 'Normandie Dock' at the mouth of the Loire was apparent to both sides. Germany's largest battleship, *Tirpitz*, by now refitted and ready to prey on Atlantic convoys from her Norwegian base, could only be risked if the one dock on the French Atlantic coast big enough to accommodate her remained operational. Yet the British knew it was too large to be destroyed by naval bombardment or bombing, even if the resources had been available - which they were not. And so, as one of CCO's 'once a fortnight

planned operations,' the dock at St Nazaire was identified as a raiding target with a very special strategic priority. With the recent fall of Singapore and escape of *Scharnhorst* and her sister ships from Brest, it could also be said that the time was ripe for some good news.

By early 1942 Mountbatten's naval planners, constantly assessing raiding opportunities, had spotted an unexpected weakness in the defences at St Nazaire. The main approach to the port was a deep channel on the North side of the estuary, directly under the cover of a large number of heavy coastal guns and searchlights. To be successful, any raid, anywhere, relied on achieving complete surprise. To achieve surprise here, even if an attacking force had not already been identified further out to sea, would seem to be impossible, and the port itself was very heavily defended. But a force of small craft with shallow draught and at the right tidal state could sail in up the Southern side, where coastal defences were lighter and an approach would be least expected. Accompanied by a shallow draught ship crammed with delayed action explosives to ram the dock gate, enough smaller boats could carry demolition-trained commandos who would land and blow up all the port installations upon which the main dock relied. Such a force



ML 268 on minelaying duty pre St Nazaire

could be deployed during the voyage across as an apparent anti-submarine sweep into the Biscay area. Meanwhile, the air planners could arrange a prolonged bombing raid to divert the enemy's attention, both before and during the attack, leading him to concentrate on the threat from the air rather than that from the sea. Finally, as the port was so far from Britain and so heavily defended, the enemy himself would regard such an attack as highly unlikely, if not downright foolish. Ergo - with luck, painstaking planning and the right physical conditions, there existed an opportunity for success.

By late January 1942 a basic plan had been hatched and approved, whereupon COHQ went into overdrive. As the Area Commander, C in C Plymouth would be in overall charge of Operation Chariot, as the plan was now called, and he lent his considerable weight to obtaining the necessary forces, material and resources. The strategic importance of rendering this vital dock useless provided added authority to the whole process, though perhaps the necessity of absolute secrecy made life pretty complicated for all concerned.

An ex-American four-stacker destroyer, HMS *Campbeltown*, was made available for the major demolition task, suitably lightened to reduce her draught and with funnels altered to align her looks with that of a German ship, and her armour plating improved on the upper deck and bridge, with extra gun mountings installed. Eight MLs (later to be increased to sixteen), had to be fitted with upper deck tanks to extend their range and embark extra gun fittings. Four had torpedo



MTB 74



MGB 314



Cdr Robert Ryder



Lt Col Charles Newman

tubes added in case the force were to meet enemy surface craft before arrival at the target. To these were added an MGB (314) to act as an HQ for the Force Commanders, and to get them ashore and be re-embarked for the return, and, as a final act of insurance, the specially fitted MTB (74) which could fire delayed action torpedoes over her bows at the dock gates if *Campbeltown* (commanded by Lt Cdr Sam Beattie RN) failed to ram herself upon them. With limited range, both were to be towed across. Finally, it was agreed to make two destroyers (*Atherstone & Tynedale*) available as escorts both for the trip across, and the return.

Meanwhile, the two men to lead the operation were appointed late in February: the Naval Commander, Cdr Robert Ryder, and the Military Commander, Lt Col Charles Newman. Though not from Coastal Forces, Ryder was very much a small ship man. As a young submariner he and four friends had been given leave to sail their 54ft yacht back home from Hong Kong, a distance of over 16,000 miles, without an engine. He had subsequently skippered the HQ ship (an ex-Breton fishing schooner) of the 1934-7 British Graham Land Expedition to the Antarctic. Early in the war, when commanding a Q-ship, he had been sunk but survived by clinging to a piece of wreckage for three days without food or water. Newman, by profession a civil engineer and an Essex Regiment Reservist for 16 years, had been specially selected to command No 2 Commando, one of twelve comprising the Special Service Brigade.

The next suitable tide window for Chariot was due at the end of March, so there was no time to lose. Key staff had to be appointed and briefed, the MLs to be the commando carriers had to be collected together, the commandos had to be brought down from their bases in Scotland, the demolition parties briefed on the niceties of dockyard demolition, the ramming ship to be suitably refitted, and all before anyone could receive final training, let alone be rehearsing the operation itself. And all this within the context of total secrecy so that most of those who were to be involved could not even be allowed to know where their eventual target was to be.

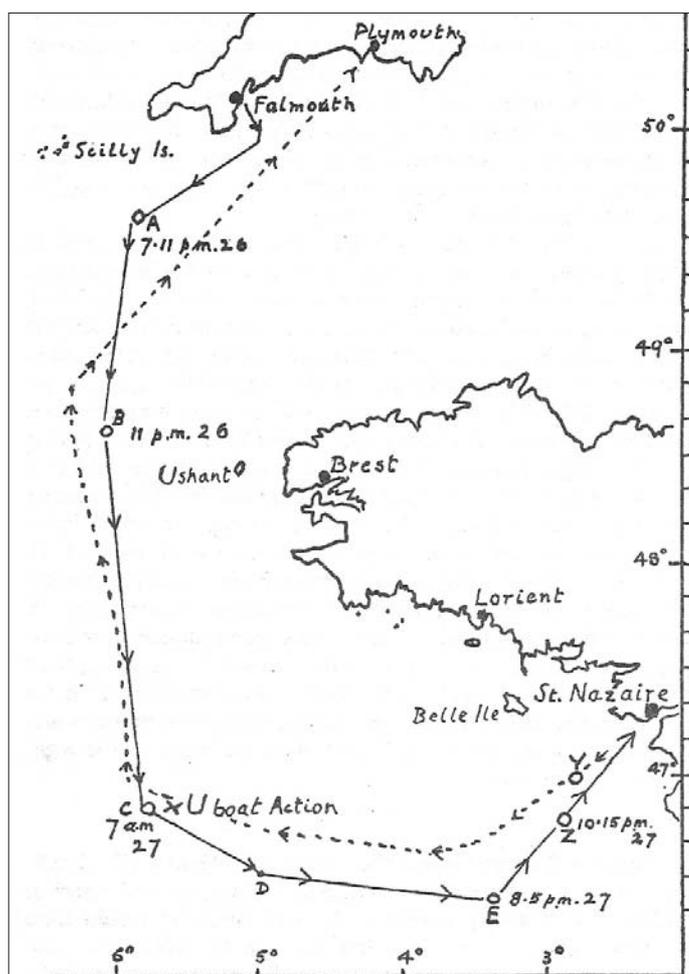
Falmouth was selected as the gathering place. As each element arrived the training began in earnest and in detail. The

raid would be at night. Notwithstanding the certainty that the dock area would be alive with hostile shells, bullets and searchlights by the time the commandos got ashore, every man had to be totally familiar with the geography and the route to his task and back to the rendezvous for the withdrawal – all in the dark. The MLs had to sharpen up their station-keeping for the voyage and their night ship handling skills. Appropriate equipment had to be allotted, fitted and fully understood by each unit – and each man. Vitally, because it was clear that the force would sustain many casualties, every task had to be cross-trained so that substitutes were ready to step in when required. The commandos were taken aboard their appointed MLs on a wild day for a 'sea sick' trip to the Scillies and a rehearsal attacking Devonport was also accomplished by the last week in March.

And providence played a part. Major Bill Pritchard of the Royal Engineers had already studied, in extreme detail, how to render dock and port installations unusable by demolition, even using a plan of St Nazaire during his training! Sound knowledge of the port and its defences, gained from the Resistance, Intelligence and air reconnaissance, was extensive, including a small scale model of the port which proved to be of priceless value to the demolition parties and their escorts. The caissons which comprised the dock gates at St Nazaire were known to be of almost the same construction as those in use at the King George V dock in Southampton, so the key plan for demolition could be finalised with some conviction, and the charges specifically designed to fit their machinery precisely. And for *Campbeltown's* own, rather tricky, demolition against the dock gate Lt Nigel Tibbits RN, a gifted explosives expert from the torpedo school at HMS *Vernon*, was able to concoct a tailor-made package comprising no less than 24 depth charges, cemented-in to ensure the delayed fuses could not be tampered with after the ship had struck. He also supervised scuttling charges to ensure she stayed put.

As the final preparations concluded and the departure date approached, the weather, which had been usefully benign, indicated a change approaching. Accordingly Ryder sought and received permission to advance the sailing date by one day, to 26 March. Co-incidentally, two unwelcome complications appeared. There were problems with the bombing diversion plan, without which the operation could not be allowed to proceed. Not until the very last moment were more aircraft allocated and their targets both during the approach and the attack phase confirmed. Secondly, the latest air photos of St Nazaire now showed that a flotilla of five enemy destroyers had arrived in the port. Though it was too late to alleviate this extra threat at such a late stage, the C in C did promise to send two more destroyers to cover the withdrawal.

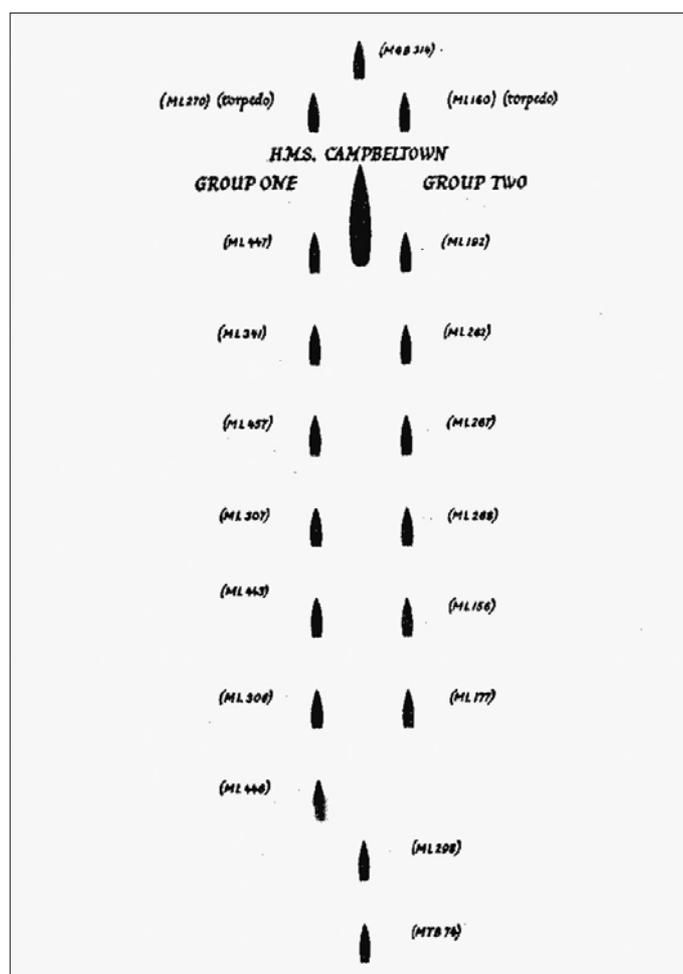
And so, at 1400 on that day the force sailed and took up their cruising formation. Escorts apart, with 345 naval personnel and 266 embarked from the commandos, the 611



There and back

Charioteers were off. At CCO's express order, all the military were volunteers, having been briefed on the location and purpose of the raid just before they sailed. All vessels were crowded. In addition to the demolition of the main dock entrance, some twenty other targets had been identified: the inner caisson, both caissons' winding gear, the pump house, other dock gates, bridges, gun and searchlight emplacements. All the demolition parties would be weighed down by their explosive packages and could carry only a pistol for personal defence, so they all had to have their own escorts; a tall order for which the commandos were divided roughly in half, the first going in *Campbeltown* and the rest in the MLs. They were pitting themselves against ten times their number. In accord with the cover plan, the fleet's course would keep them well away from land, indeed they would be approaching their target from the South West, guided in on the final leg by a submarine acting as a navigational beacon. When required, the destroyers would fly the German ensign to avoid recognition.

The voyage was not to be without incident, though the first day was blessed with fair but hazy conditions – just what was wanted. But dawn on 27 March produced clear skies and maximum visibility and as they turned in towards the French coast a surfaced U-Boat was sighted some miles off. The destroyers immediately went in to investigate and, subsequently,



Attack formation

to attack. But the boat submerged and evaded them. Ryder could not know if his force had been fully sighted and reported, so he ordered the destroyers to dis-engage to the West. (This decision proved crucial and in fact led the enemy to judge that a mine-laying group were withdrawing after completion of their task). Next, they came upon a fleet of French fishing trawlers - a not unexpected occurrence. And they knew German observers with radio sets might be aboard. But after a brief exchange with, and eventual welcome by, the French crews, all was well. More good luck was at hand; visibility fell as the sky became overcast, thus making air reconnaissance more unlikely; and, acting on the U-Boat's sighting report, a signal from home indicated those Loire based destroyers had been sent to look for them further out to sea.

On they went, now at a quiet 8 knots and with spirits high but nerves tightening. ML 341 had to withdraw with engine trouble and the wisdom of bringing a 'spare' was justified as ML 298 took on her troops and replaced her in the formation. At 2000 MGB 314 cast off from her towing ship *Atherstone* and came alongside to take off Ryder and Newman, their few staff and escorts, and then moved to the head of the final approach formation. Likewise MTB 74 left *Campbeltown* and took up station astern. Only seventy odd miles to go now and speed was increased to 12 knots. Two hours later, providing a really



Commandos ashore!

impressive morale boost for all concerned, precisely on time and directly ahead, the shaded signal from the navigational submarine *Sturgeon* appeared. The commandos were deeply impressed – what could go wrong now? The escort destroyers turned away to patrol the entrance to the broader estuary and await the attacking force's return. Forty miles to go and the haze became moist, just what they, if not the bombers, needed. At 2300, according to plan, Tibbits set the eight-hour fuses for Campbeltown's finale. With a two-hour tolerance either way, she would explode between 0500 and 0900 next day.

Just before midnight the bombers were first heard overhead and then the critical aerial diversion began. The sky ahead was lit up by searchlights playing over the clouds, the sharp flashes of guns and myriad streaks of tracer, followed by the deeper crump of exploding bombs, one by one rather than in groups. The enemy's attention was certainly being given to the air. Afloat, all parties went to their final action stations but, as they were nearing the final approach point with land just sighted to the North, the bombing eased, the searchlights went out and the firing ceased. Why? For the fleet this was the critical moment for the diversion in the sky to continue. But it didn't – and ashore the Germans had smelt a rat. Why was the bombing so erratic, bombs falling singly rather than in loads? Why was it so prolonged? So as it faded away and aircraft could be heard but not seen through the cloud, the gun commander ordered a ceasefire and the searchlights to be extinguished, followed by a

pre-arranged signal – “*beware landing*”. Not only did this order warn the guns, lights and lookouts to concentrate down onto the surface, but defending garrison troops formerly in shelters below ground were hurried to their action stations above ground. Yet for some inexplicable reason this order took some five minutes to reach the searchlight positions. That delay proved invaluable.



Lt Cdr Sam Beattie

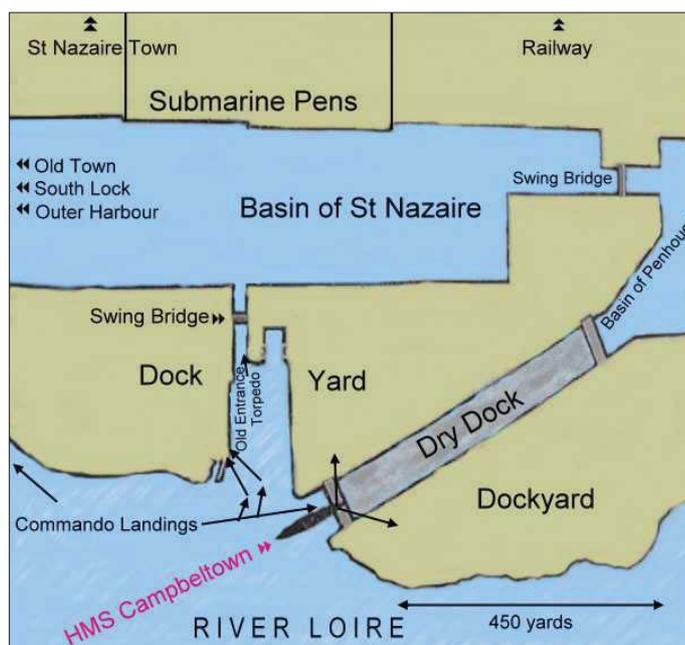
In the attacking fleet speed was now down to 10 knots to reduce *Campbeltown's* draught over the mudbanks, but she did in fact ground twice, “*churning and shuddering through the mud*”. With only the MGB ahead and the MLs in columns on each quarter, she stood on unimpeded, and on the bridge they could scarcely believe their luck. Suddenly, at 0122 the whole fleet was lit-up by a large searchlight and, with only two miles to go now, there came the first challenge. Ryder's carefully calculated, and confusing, delaying replies were sent by his personal signalman, in German and with the hoped-for correct response. There was some sporadic, but hesitant, firing which shortly ceased. Vital seconds were being saved, until finally at 0127 the bluff was called and the battle began. Five minutes

to go and *Campbeltown* increased to her final ramming speed of 18 knots as the searchlights watched her surge ahead, run down the German flag, and hoist her battle ensign.

Over a hundred guns of many calibres opened up, all within what was now a small area and at very close range. As Ryder observed afterwards: "It was difficult to describe the fury of the attack let loose on either side." In his boat lay the key to guiding *Campbeltown* until the moment she could see the dock gate. The little gunboat's for'ard pom-pom, manned by Able Seaman Bill Savage, had already doused a troublesome searchlight and was now busy trying to silence the guns on the dock arms. Meanwhile, the larger ship had become the centre of the enemy's focus and fire was literally raining down upon her. Beattie, aware that his party on the ship's bridge had become too conspicuous, moved down to the wheelhouse below. Here, after two helmsmen had been hit and killed, Tibbits coolly took the wheel for the final moments. The foc's'le was hit and already there were many casualties both amongst the crew and their commando passengers gathered amidships. Beattie peered ahead for sight of the lock through the now considerable smoke. At that moment he saw two arms open ahead, and then it hit him that they were the old entrance, not that of the newer dock. "Hard a-starboard" came just in time and luck appeared once more in the shape of a searchlight showing him exactly where he wanted to go. He spotted the leading MGB swinging away to starboard and knew he had arrived at his last turn. "Steer 350. Stand by to ram," was followed by a slight shudder as his ship tore through the anti-torpedo boom.

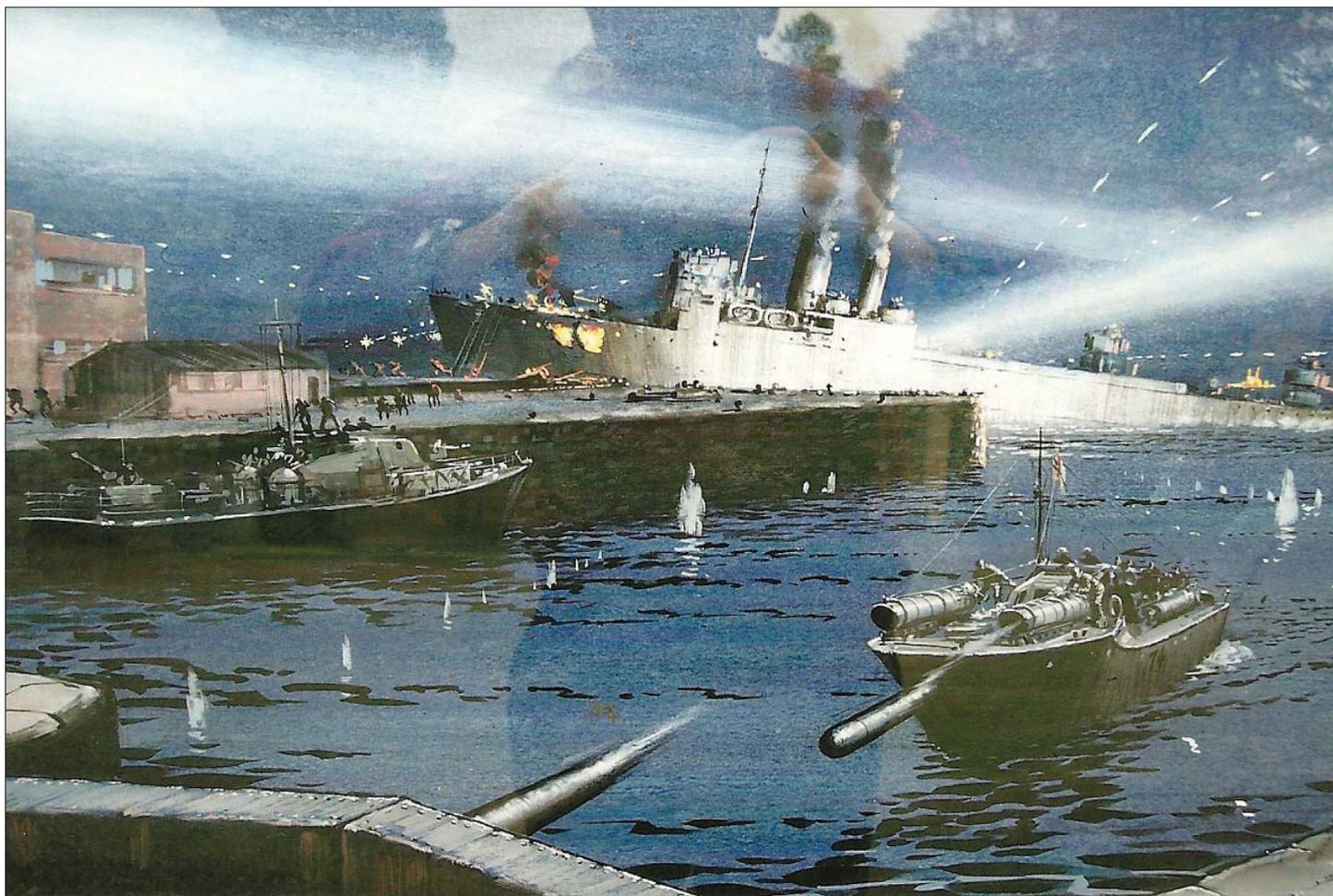
As the steel dock gate came in sight a cable away it seemed almost impossible the ship could avoid serious damage from the fire concentrated upon her, but still she ploughed on, up to 20 knots by now and throwing a considerable bow wave. An incendiary shell exploded on the foc's'le to make things even more difficult and causing more heavy casualties. At the very last moment, in order to ensure he hit the caisson at dead centre, Beattie ordered "Port 20". At 0134 they hit, riding over the caisson by no less than 36 ft before coming to a halt with the bows just protruding over the inside of the gate. Within minutes, still under heavy fire and using ladders provided for the purpose, the first commando groups were ashore and off to their demolition targets, carrying their wounded with them. In spite of the fire still raging on the foc's'le Beattie ordered the scuttling charges to be fired and his crew to abandon ship, some being taken off by ML 177 which had come alongside to port.

Meanwhile, out in the river the scene can only be described as one of carnage. Hopelessly unable to withstand the weight of shot coming at them from every point ashore, the wooden MLs, although replying with every means at their disposal, including the small arms of their commando passengers, were taking horrific punishment. Of the seven boats in the starboard column, only one (ML 156) was to survive the maelstrom and



only one (ML177) succeeded in landing his commandos. The remainder met their fate either by shell, explosion or fire. Their gallant crews and commandos were decimated, many drowning in the fast current and more dying within the terrible petrol fires which now spread over the water. Those few who survived and got ashore became prisoners. Those in the port column hardly fared better. Their proposed landing place was by now occupied by enemy defence troops, as well as being in the field of fire of the shore guns, so their task was ever more hazardous. In fact, only two boats were able to get alongside, though five of them survived to begin the journey home. All were subjected to incredibly fierce fire, some even recording shells passing through one side of the boat and coming out from the other. With the heavy casualties sustained, it is in any case doubtful if their commandos, had they got ashore, would have been able to reach their demolition objectives.

While all this was going on, Ryder and Newman had been put ashore from MGB 314 alongside the old dock entrance, close to where *Campbeltown* lay. Ryder's radio set had already been shot away so this would be the last time the two leaders could communicate. As Newman left him, a series of major explosions further inshore informed Ryder that the destruction of the dock's machinery had now been successfully accomplished. Buoyed up with this knowledge, but largely unsighted from the events in the river, Newman went off to join his men while Ryder checked the recovery of the ship's crew and, knowing she was now settling, he called in MTB 74 to lay her torpedoes against the old dock gate, thus sealing inside the variety of minesweepers and submarines within the inner basin. 74 then withdrew with the remainder of *Campbeltown's* crew; and Ryder, back on board 314, decided to see what was going on outside. It was an appalling scene. Ordering the CO, Lt Dunstan Curtis, to go to the aid of a gallant ML making a second attempt to land his commandos but already on fire,



Campbeltown, MGB 314 & MTB 74

314's forward gunner, Able Seaman Bill Savage, silenced a heavy weapon ashore, but the little gunboat was now drawing all the fire upon herself and was forced to withdraw. So, being now the only boat left afloat and not on fire, and with any prospect of bringing off Newman and his party gone, Ryder reluctantly made the difficult decision to withdraw, and off they went down river, the decks crowded with casualties and still followed by the searchlights, at 24 knots.

Ashore, Newman turned his attention to the two demolition groups briefed to destroy the many secondary targets. He soon realised his plans were unravelling fast as so few of these groups, and their fighting escorts, had been able to land. Worse, it was clear the enemy were getting organised, and to move around the area was to court ever more fire from an ever increasing number of directions. So he sent runners out to call in all remaining parties to his central headquarters. After a short conference with his number two, Major Bill Copland, it was decided the tiny force, now down to around 100, would try to fight their way out through the town to the countryside rather than surrender. After some serious fighting when at times they "*felt we were gaining the upper hand*", they were held up at the bridge which was their only escape route. Re-grouping here, they succeeded in forcing their way across. Quite simply the enemy's night fighting

techniques were no match for the still confident commandos. But once across that bridge their luck ran out, German reinforcements arrived, and surrender was the only course left to them if any lives at all were to be saved. By now only one out of five were un-injured and, although they broke away into small groups, virtually all were captured within a few hours. But because they knew the main objective of the raid had been achieved, "*Our spirits were still high*", said Newman later, "*it was like a re-union. But what we all waited for was the big bang of Campbeltown going up*".

While the dockyard troops were seeking a way out, Ryder's boats were also withdrawing down the estuary under smoke but, with the enemy guns and searchlights now on full alert, they came under heavy and unceasing fire from the full gamut of coastal artillery, right up to 6.6" in calibre. ML 177, crowded with the destroyer's crew, including Sam Beattie and Nigel Tibbits, was severely hit and set on fire. For three hours all aboard struggled to save their vessel but eventually had to abandon ship. Many died but a few were saved from their raft further out to sea by an enemy patrol trawler. MTB 74 fared no better, again hit and on fire, the boat used her speed to avoid the guns and try to douse the fire. Unhappily but understandably, she stopped for a moment to rescue men from a Carley raft and was illuminated and mortally hit in that courageous act. From another crowded



AB Bill Savage



Sgt Tom Durrant

boat, only four survived to be taken as prisoners some hours later by a German gunboat.

ML 306 was one of the craft which had been unable to land her commandos, so she was going back to sea in frustration at missing completion of her tasks. Reaching the withdrawal rendezvous early, she decided to keep going, only to fall in with that enemy destroyer flotilla, which had now been appraised of the attack and recalled. As they passed by on reciprocal courses, the third ship in line, *Jaguar*, sighted the dark outline which was 306 and hauled out to investigate. There followed an incredibly fierce engagement between the overcrowded 112 ft wooden ML and the 800 ton steel destroyer. First she tried to ram but only achieved a glancing blow, next she stood off with all guns blazing down the beam of her searchlight, finally she closed until she was alongside and those left were obliged to surrender. 14 crew and 14 soldiers had fought back with everything they had, the Lewis gun being the heaviest. Amongst the chaos and the slaughter, Sergeant Tom Durrant, a regular of the Royal Engineers, thrice wounded during the battle, manned that Lewis gun until he was dragged off it. So those few who remained alive were returned to St Nazaire and captivity, but Durrant and the boat's gallant CO, Lt Ian Henderson, had died as the battle ended.

Ryder himself in MGB 314 was the last boat to seek the shelter of the open sea, pulling out at about 0300. At speed and having dropped smoke-floats to attract enemy fire – which worked – she was lucky to evade the guns from either side and although hit and crowded with casualties both on deck and below, she reached the rendezvous and passed on until sighting *Atherstone* and *Tynedale*. Also present were MLs 446 and 156, albeit both in badly damaged condition. The destroyers had just come from yet another brief encounter with that rogue German flotilla, but without serious problems. 156 was abandoned and Ryder's party transferred back to *Atherstone*. Meanwhile a number of air battles took place as both sides sent out their air patrols and during that day five enemy aircraft were shot down and two friendlies lost. Further out the small fleet was joined by the two extra ships sent to cover the return passage, *Cleveland* and *Brockslesby*. The former's CO Cdr Guy Sayer, (by chance the SO of the pre-war 1st MTB Flotilla), senior to Ryder as he

was, took over command and he decided, both for reasons of safety and the need to hurry the wounded back to hospital, to abandon and scuttle the last remaining raiding craft and leg it for home at 25 knots. And so it was that they said farewell to MLs 446 and 270, plus the gallant little MGB 314. Unbeknown to them at that stage though, there were still three more boats left of the original eighteen. MLs 160, 307 and 443, having missed the rendezvous, returned home independently, shooting down a Heinkel 111 on their way!

Back ashore at St Nazaire the ramifications of the raid were to take many days to die down. In the morning after the raid, as the commandos in the town were rounded up and moved to secure locations, so also were the living and dead collected from the estuary and its shores. The Germans, having inspected *Campbeltown* from top to bottom and found nothing to cause them alarm, allowed a miscellany of observers to climb on board and did nothing to deter bystanders, German or French. Without warning, some ninety minutes after the final time on the fuses, a colossal explosion rocked the whole area, creating an enormous pall of black smoke. The caisson gate gave way, the fore part of the ship was blown to smithereens, together with those aboard and the spectators, and a cascade of water swept the stern into the dock. Two small tankers within were tossed aside like dolls. It was perhaps a fitting finale to what Churchill later called "*A Deed of Glory*". The dock was not to be in use for another ten years and within the whole of France the boost to morale and hope was incalculable.

But success had come at a very high price: 169 Charioteers died and many more were seriously injured, two-thirds of the casualties being from the naval side. VCs were won by Ryder, Newman, Beattie and, posthumously, Sgt Durrant and AB Savage. Uniquely, the VC citations for Ryder and Savage included reference to the valour shown by their shipmates and "*many others of coastal forces*". That for Durrant was the first to be awarded to a soldier in a naval action. There were no less than seventy-nine further gallantry awards and fifty-one Mentions in Despatches, twenty-two of which were posthumous.



Memorial at St Nazaire

SPECIAL FEATURE

“ALL THE ELEMENTS WERE PRESENT FOR DISASTER.”*

Post-war, anyone trained in the gunnery world of the Royal Navy would have been familiar with the old adage: *“Ammunition is safe until you forget it is dangerous”*. Precisely the same may be applied to the high-octane fuel used by the engines of the vast majority of CF craft which fought in World War II. Bearing in mind they all went to sea with fuel tanks topped up and fully stored with ammunition and/or torpedoes, it is hardly surprising the boats were often referred to as ‘floating bombs’. They even sometimes carried extra fuel on the upper deck in special tanks or metal drums, in order to extend their range. But how did the men who manned these boats cope with that knowledge and behave in such a way as to reduce the risks so obviously attached? Clearly there were Standing Orders to be followed and handling rules to be obeyed, all of which must have become second nature for those involved, otherwise far more accidents would be featured within the various histories, written or related. There are many reports of heroic deeds which involved fire-fighting during or after an action, so quite clearly crews were only too aware of the dangers surrounding them. It is a great tribute to them that amazingly few reports exist of accidents with petrol – except that is for the one really serious disaster which occurred on the afternoon of 14th February 1945, in Belgium’s Ostend harbour, full to the brim with warships.

In the inner harbour, close to the Coastal Forces Mobile Unit office, lay eight 4-boat trots of CF craft of various types, including 7 boats of the Canadian 29th Flotilla. During a trial trip to sea that day, one of their boats had been troubled by water-contaminated fuel and so, the boat being scheduled for a patrol that night, the water needed pumping out. Most high-octane fuel contained a green dye to make it easy to spot leaks or accidental spills, but with sludge and dirty water around this was not fool-proof. Just as the pumping out was completing, the CO of a boat entering harbour thought he smelt fuel and hurried ashore to the office to report it. But, even as he went, a desperate shout of “Fire!” was heard and, within less than a minute, two trots of boats were ablaze.

As the flames began to engulf another trot to leeward, a brave stoker crash-started the engines of a boat to windward in an effort to drag his trot clear, while the remaining crews began to jettison ammunition. Others sought to fight the fires. Next, just a few brief minutes after the first alarm, came the first, colossal, explosion. A wall of noise and heat swept in all directions. Windows a mile away were shattered; people said the ground shook several miles inland and the sound carried as far across the North Sea as England. Two boats simply disintegrated as

the high-octane gas carried flames in all directions, setting fire to many more boats and some shore installations.

Unsurprisingly, there was confusion and some panic as crew members ran for the jetty or jumped overboard to avoid the flames. A massive second explosion followed, destroying another boat, releasing two craft which began to drift with the tide towards the main harbour, and spreading the fires ever more widely. These in turn began to reach the live ammunition, shells, depth charges, and even torpedoes, creating a continuing rumble of smaller explosions. From the town centre nearly a mile away black smoke and “*airborne fireballs*” caused officers billeted ashore to race for the harbour and organise sailors into parties to ditch ammunition from the craft as yet untouched but still within range of the fires.

As the fires were gradually extinguished, night began to fall, the rescue vehicles and ambulances continued their almost ceaseless procession to collect the dead and injured, and the terrible enormity of the disaster became clear. 73 people had lost their lives, including 9 civilians, with a further 65 injured. 14 boats were destroyed, including five from the Canadian 29th Flotilla.

By a strange twist of fate the SO of the 29th, Lt Cdr Tony Law DSC RCNVR, had taken his boat across to Felixstowe that very afternoon for repairs to his radar which could not be effected by the CFMU at Ostend. Sent for by the commanding officer of the Base early the next morning, he was told the devastating news. His flotilla as such was no more. Within a few days five boats from the other all-Canadian flotilla, the 65th, arrived at Ostend to take over the business of fighting the enemy. With considerable personal courage, several crew members from the 29th joined them, in spite of the fact that for some weeks after February 14th further casualties came to light and the business of recovery and burial, ashore or at sea, continued.

A Naval Board of Inquiry was set up to consider the causes of this most terrible CF tragedy of the war. What caused the initial conflagration will never be known but what is certain is that the inner harbour contained much more high-octane gas than was safe. The catalyst could have been a spark, a faulty electrical connection, a focussed sun-ray or even a discarded cigarette. The Board’s findings did, however, criticize a number of officers who held the final responsibility to ensure that Standing Orders were efficiently applied. But within that report there was scant recognition of the fact that most of these men had been nearing the limits of physical and emotional endurance after taking the war to the enemy, night after night, for nearly a year without a break.

Many years later, on 8th May 2003, at the initiative of Canadian veterans and at the invitation of the local Ostend authorities, a suitable Memorial was unveiled in the presence of many who had been in Ostend on that terrible day.



LEFT *Ostend Memorial*

RIGHT *The aftermath*

**with acknowledgements to Nolan and Street's 'Champagne Navy'.*



LIVES IN BRIEF

JOHN COLLINS MBE DSC*

Nick-named 'Tiny Tim' due to his 6ft 6in frame, Tim Collins was one of the many gallant rescuers after the mustard gas explosion at Bari in 1943, for which he was awarded the MBE. Upon recovery from his injuries he rejoined the 28th Flotilla as CO of MTB 406. Chasing enemy shipping and supporting the Yugoslav partisans in the Adriatic, the flotilla recorded an outstanding series of actions in the early months of 1945, when Collins won a DSC and Bar for his part, including the sinking one night of two ships with a single torpedo.

On leaving the Service he joined Morgan Grenfell where he enjoyed a distinguished career in banking, becoming Group Chairman in 1973. He was a Deputy Lieutenant and former High Sheriff of Oxfordshire, where he enjoyed fishing and became a well-known figure on the steeplechasing Turf.

SYDNEY CLIFFORD

As one of the very early members, Syd Clifford gave invaluable support to the Coastal Forces Veterans' Association for many years. In his war service he served in MTBs 38 and 698, and no less than five different MGBs – 109, 40, 42, 117, and 630 - which must be some sort of record. He was a co-founder of the Southern annual re-union luncheons which lasted right up until 2012, he played a leading UK role in the establishment of the Ostend memorial dedicated to those who lost their lives in the tragic fire of 1945, and he was always on offer to

help for anything to do with the Association. He produced CF tapes for blind veterans and, when the CFVA were invited to Buckingham Palace for lunch, he sat next to one Tony Blair, which must have been a real treat for the then PM. A talented musician and member of the Shanklin Town Brass Band, his abiding passion was for his motor-bike, which he rode until well into his eighties. A real CF character has been lost.

LORD (J.V.) FISHER DSC

As the grandson of the 1st Sea Lord during World War 1, Admiral of the Fleet Lord Jackie Fisher, it was natural for John Fisher to join the RNVR in 1941. In CF he served first in MTB 624, defending coastal convoys against E-Boats and later more offensively attacking enemy convoys across the North Sea. Next he became 1st Lt of a Dog boat, MTB 687, the leader of the 58th flotilla. Under the command of Lt Cdr Ken Gemmell the flotilla became famous for its clandestine work, operating between Lerwick and Norway, sometimes lying up under camouflage in fjords, and which included landing agents and recovering resistance workers under Gestapo suspicion. For this work he was awarded a DSC.

Succeeding to the Barony in 1955, he ran the family estate at Kilverstone in Norfolk and established a wild-life park there which in time specialised in Latin American species. Active in local politics, he was mayor of Thetford in 1962, served as a Magistrate and member of the East Anglia Development Planning Council and was a Deputy Lieutenant of the county.

IN MEMORIAM

WE SAY FAREWELL TO:

	(CFVA No)		(CFVA No)
T.E.Allaway		B.Key	(1111)
C.Brockwell DSM		S.Linnett	(870)
Mary Catton		T.E.B.Mills	(2856)
(nee Pritchett)	(2272)	S.Morton	(2703)
J.E.H.Collins OBE DSC*		S.G.Munns	(2765)
D.Chance		N.M.Newcombe	(1492)
S.J.Dakin	(798)	E.Pedley	
J.P.Doubleday	(192)	M.J.Pollard	
Lord (J.V.) Fisher DSC		D.Powell	(3339)
L.Fisher	(3129)	D.Price	(957)
B.Foulds	(2515)	G.I.Pritchard CB	
V.M.Goom	(2259)	J.Ralph	(2023)
I.D.Haig	(2481)	M.J.G.Sadd	(3387)
K.R.Hall	(3272)	G.M.S.Sayer OBE	
R.B.Howell		C.W.Sears	(1180)
E.B.Hughes	(2565)	Sir Colin R.W. Spedding	
C.Hughes-Jones	(2264)	Doris Wise	(1086)
F.Jones	(3148)		

!!!STOP PRESS!!!

TRUST SECRETARY

Captain Michael Gordon Lennox OBE RN is retiring with effect from the end of April this year, after twelve loyal and hard-working years in the job. There are no other changes to the office staff at this time and contact details for anyone wishing to get in touch remain as shown on this page.

WE WILL REMEMBER THEM

THE COASTAL FORCES HERITAGE TRUST

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and Mount Royal

Chairman: John Ascoli

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Trustees:

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William Dreyer, Reg Ellis, Antony Hichens, Miles
Robinson, Captain Trevor Robotham RN, Alan
Watson, David Watson, Cdr Alastair Wilson RN

Objective of the Trust:

The object of the Coastal Forces Heritage Trust is the advancement of the education of the public in the history of Coastal Forces by restoration and permanent display, for the public benefit, of Coastal Forces craft together with relevant artefacts, records and memorabilia relating to such craft, and those who served therein.