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NEWSLETTER

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At Sea with 1st Patrol Boat Squadron

In this edition our Project Director's report details the Trust's plans for our Coastal Forces Museum and permanent Exhibition. His report also spells-out the Trust's previous accomplishments and the work required to achieve our aim. Our main article depicts Coastal Forces involvement in World War II Operation Husky, the invasion of Sicily prior to the first Allied invasion of the European mainland, through Italy. This was the largest invasion force gathered together before the D Day invasion a year later. We also include an article about the First Patrol Boat Squadron with which the Trust has a close association. We frequently include news articles about the activities of their individual boats but our article in this Newsletter gives a much broader picture of the squadron. Once

again, we have an article on the clandestine operations undertaken by the 15th MGB Flotilla and this article focuses on some specific operations of MTB 502, whose work for the intelligence service provided an extremely valuable contribution to the war effort. I would like to bring readers' attention to two new publications featured in the Newsletter. The first, "MTB 718 *Something Special*", whose operations have appeared in Newsletter 15 and the re-issue of "*Gunboat Command*" the excellent Biography of Lieutenant Commander Robert Hichens DSO* DSC** RNVR, which was first published in hardback in 2007 to great acclaim.

Captain Trevor Robotham RN -
Editor

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CHAIRMAN'S LETTER

It is with regret that I inform readers that John Ascoli has had to relinquish his post as Chairman of the Trust due to continuing ill health which is now preventing him contributing to the extent that he would wish. John has been a Trustee for fifteen years and Chairman of the Trust for the past three years. The son of a World War II Coastal Forces veteran, Lieutenant Commander Hugh Ascoli DSC, John also served in Coastal Forces at HMS Hornet as a Midshipman for his National Service in the mid 1950s. No one involved in the Trust was more passionate about ensuring that the Coastal Forces history was given due prominence than John and he was a tireless worker across the whole range of Trust activity. He made a major contribution to the programme of placing commemorative plaques at our former Coastal Forces Bases, a very successful project, and his enthusiasm contributed to the success of the Trusts DVD, "A History of the Royal Navy's Coastal Forces". During his time as Chairman, the Trust became affiliated with The National Museum of the Royal Navy and he

worked tirelessly to ensure that we progressed our aim of having a Coastal Forces exhibition within the National Museum. We are confident that John will continue to remain associated with the Trust. In the interim, at the wish of the Trustees, I have assumed the position of Acting Chairman.

It is with great pleasure that we welcome Vice-Admiral Sir Paul Haddacks KBE as a Trustee. He had a long and successful naval career which included a number of sea-going commands, beginning with that of the Fast Patrol Boat HMS *Scimitar*. As an Admiral he held two major NATO appointments before retiring from the service and subsequently becoming Lieutenant Governor of The Isle of Man, from 2005 to 2011. We are both pleased and extremely privileged to have him as a Trustee at a time when we are moving forward quickly towards achieving our aim for a permanent Exhibition.

Captain Trevor Robotham RN – Acting Chairman

PROJECT DIRECTOR'S REPORT

Having been in post for six months I thought it time to bring everyone up to date with the plans the Trust has for the commissioning of the Coastal Forces Museum (CFM) in 2016. The Trust has been working very closely with the National Museum of the Royal Navy (NMRN) who will project-manage the refurbishment of the future Coastal Forces Museum building. This is a redundant Mine Store sited alongside the Explosion Museum of naval armaments at Priddy's Hard in Gosport. The Coastal Forces Museum on this site will completely complement the weapons being displayed in the Explosion Museum. To support this project the Trust has agreed with the NMRN management to raise matching funding of £50,000, towards the NMRN's bid for a major Grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund and to assist with Phase One of the plans. This includes the commissioning and development of the Coastal Forces exhibits and renovation of the boats that will form the centre-piece of the exhibition. In parallel the Trust needs to continue to generate funds to ensure its future and the continuation of its work. As we now have this major fundraising effort underway, I am also asking all supporters and readers of the newsletter who feel able, to assist us in raising the funding required. Gift Aid forms are available on the web site and on the back of the newsletter. Many of you have already responded generously to the personal letters sent to some Newsletter recipients, for which we are extremely grateful. In support of the fundraising plan, a presentation and road show is being produced for use

with selected venues and audiences throughout 2015. MTB 71, which has been a central theme for the development of the CFHT Museum, is scheduled to arrive in Portsmouth during early 2015 and the delay in the transfer of this boat from the Imperial War Museum has only been due to uncertainty over temporary storage, which is now being resolved.

Our Aim is to work with the NMRN to ensure that the Coastal Forces Museum tells the extraordinary and exciting story of the men and women of Coastal Forces, their boats and the operations that they conducted. The Museum will tell the story from its early beginnings during the First World War, through the interwar years and Second World War until the decommissioning of Coastal Forces in 1957. As the CFM develops it is intended to bring the story right up to date and include post war operations leading to the Royal Navy's Fast Training Boats and more recently the modern inshore operations of the Patrol Boat Squadrons.

One of the most exciting and long overdue tasks that the Trust has now embarked upon is the collation and digitisation of all Coastal Forces archive material. Currently this is being prepared for handover to the NMRN whose digitisation work will then permit researchers to access the information on-line and the original material will be stored in a suitable environment. The small down side to this development is that there will be a short period when the archive material is difficult for visitor and researchers to access.

Striving towards the establishment of a CF museum with a permanent Coastal Forces exhibition has been a long venture and the Trust is grateful for your continued support, which has bolstered our determination to succeed.

During its lifetime the Trust's achievements include:

- * Producing the DVD film of the history of Coastal Forces.
- * Placing memorial plaques at twelve wartime Coastal Forces bases.
- * Establishing formal affiliation with the National Museum of the Royal Navy.
- * Building the archive of models, memorabilia, and artefacts ready for public display.
- * Publishing a twice-yearly Newsletter to link past and present.
- * Organising the annual Remembrance Service at the Coastal Forces Memorial at Gosport.
- * Recording on DVD the personal stories of many veterans from World War II.
- * Acquiring two restored Coastal Forces boats for display in the Museum.
- * Maintaining close links with the small ships of today's Royal Navy.

- * Supporting a strong and active veterans association.
- * Sustaining loyal membership who continue to support through donations.
- * Providing support to a range of maritime exhibitions and events.

Additional to the work above our current tasks include:

- * Fundraising for both Trust and the Coastal Forces Museum.
- * Collating and digitising our archive.
- * Producing a TV series covering Coastal Forces World War II activity.
- * Providing support to individuals and organisations engaged in the preservation of historic Coastal Forces Vessels.

I'd like to take this opportunity to thank all those who have provided most valuable support to me in the first six months of my job. At the same time I would tell all our supporters that we are extremely careful with the donations you provide and would ask that you continue that support to ensure that our future plans are achieved.

Commander Brian Lambert RN – Project Director

BOATS ROUNDUP

HDML 1387 (MEDUSA)

Like all the heritage boats Medusa has spent the winter months undertaking maintenance in preparation for a busy Spring and Summer programme. This will include a West Country cruise calling at Portland, Torquay, Brixham, Dartmouth, Slapton Sands, where HDML 1387 was involved in Exercise Fabius, and then possibly onto the Channel Islands. More information is available on the recently updated Medusa Trust website at www.hmsmedusa.org.uk

MTB 102

An annual refit has also dominated the winter scene for MTB 102. The boat has had a new Engine Room cover fitted with repositioned hatches, which will reflect her 1940 configuration. In addition, an appeal by Norfolk Marine has resulted in an AIS B Radio link (Hyperlink) being fitted, which will allow the tracking of MTB 102 at sea. She is expected to be ready for sea in sufficient time to be at Ramsgate by late May for the 75th Anniversary celebration of the Dunkirk evacuation, with a return passage to the beaches. By visiting www.mtb102.com readers can see film of her at sea.



MTB 102 off Lowestoft

MTB 219

After twelve months in the boatyard of Durlough Displays Ltd., at Bridgewater, Somerset, the Childs family and their helpers have successfully restored the hull of MTB 219 and she is now afloat in Bridgewater Docks, TA6 3EX. Here it is planned to complete the restoration of the Bridge and Upperworks. MTB 219 made history in February 1942 when, in a fierce action which became known as "The Channel Dash", she was one of the five MTBs which attempted to stop the three German battle cruisers, Scharnhorst, Gneisenau and Prinz Eugen, from transiting the

English Channel to return to their German base. The German ships had a huge escort of destroyers, E-Boats and aircraft and so the MTBs and Swordfish aircraft from the Fleet Air Arm were unable to prevent the enemy ships getting home. Nevertheless, none of the cruisers was ever able to return to attack allied shipping in the Atlantic. MTB 219 excelled in rescuing a number of airmen on that day although other airmen were not so lucky. Of the eighteen young men of the Fleet Air Arm who flew the attack bombers only five survived the battle. Their leader was awarded a posthumous VC. (see www.militaryboats.org)

MTB 219 at Durlough boatyard



INTERNATIONAL WOMENS DAY



LEFT Wren specialists came aboard as soon as a boat made fast after returning from sea. Guns would be serviced, and torpedoes loaded, in readiness for the next patrol.

BELOW A Wren armourer refits the Vickers machine gun of a Motor Torpedo Boat. The label attached to the gun muzzle reads MTB 55. © IWM

The 8 March was International Women's Day and we should not forget the great contribution made by the women serving as WRENS through World War II.

During the Second World War, thousands of women in the Womens' Royal Naval Service (Wrens) worked alongside men of the Royal Navy's Light Coastal Forces, carrying out a diverse range of duties, from the more 'traditional' roles such as clerical & admin support, through to signallers, boat handlers, motor mechanics, torpedo specialists, and armourers.

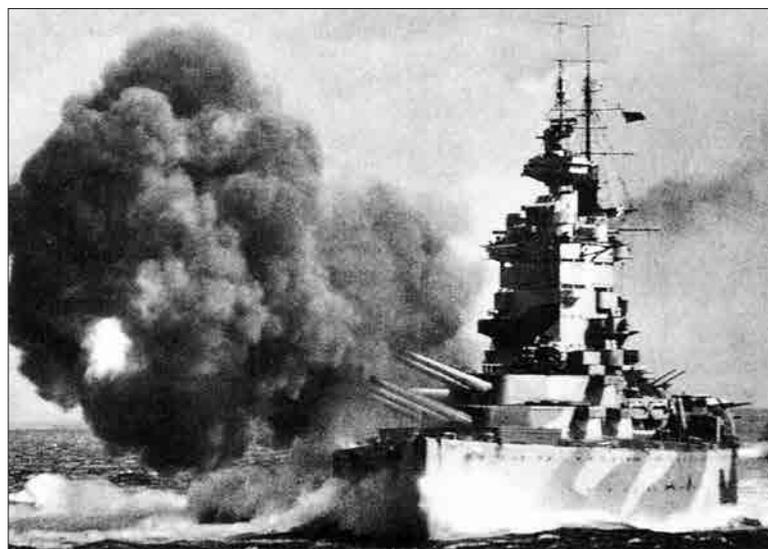
Women specialists became central to the effective working of frontline Coastal Forces bases within the British Isles, and played a vital role in keeping MTBs, MGBs & MLs seaworthy, and in a state of constant readiness. Wrens working with Coastal Forces suffered a number of tragedies in the war, most notably eight young women at HMS Midge at Great Yarmouth were killed during an air raid on 18 March 1943.



OPERATION HUSKY – THE ALLIED INVASION OF SICILY – AND BEYOND

In May 1943 the German and Italian forces in North Africa surrendered thus ending that long campaign and allowing the focus of the war to swing to the island of Sicily and on to the Italian mainland. Coastal Forces had played a very active part along the coasts of North Africa and at the end of the African Campaign the flotillas were despatch to Malta and their new operating Base, HMS *Gregale*. After an extremely necessary period of rest and repair the boats and their crews were then thrown into nightly operations in the next phase of the Mediterranean war. Initially in June 1943 they supported a group of cruisers and destroyers, Force K, with attacks on the islands of Pantelleria and then Lampedusa and Linosa. These were strategically important enemy positions in the Sicilian narrows and they had to be captured if an invasion of Sicily, the next allied objective, was to be achieved. This was dangerous work for Coastal Forces and it became clear that they were there with the cruisers and destroyers to draw enemy fire and give markers for further bombardment. Once opposition from these islands had been rendered ineffective it was apparent that the invasion of Sicily was to be launched quickly, only to be confirmed by the massive build-up of ships taking place in Malta in the latter part of June 1943.

Operation Husky, the Allied invasion of Sicily was the first assault on occupied Europe and its importance and the

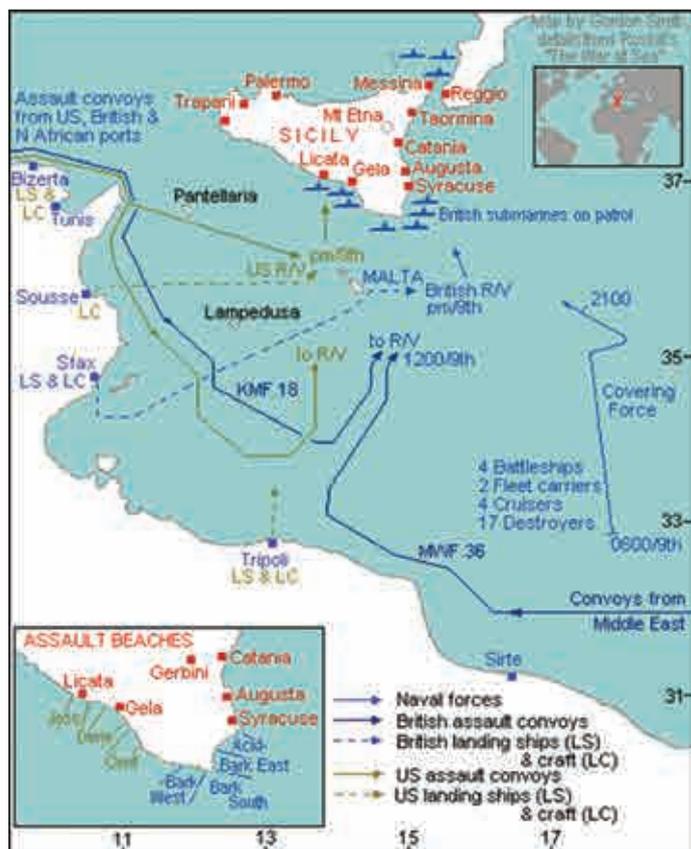


HMS Nelson one of six battleships that led the shore bombardment from a naval task force of 182 warships and 126 landing craft

part played by Coastal Forces cannot be over estimated. It was also the largest maritime invasion force assembled at that stage of the war. Delivering a very large invasion force off the shores of Sicily involved huge logistical problems. Heavily escorted convoys of troop transports and supply vessels had been converging on the approaches to the landing beaches for days. Some had come from the USA and Britain without any staging point. Others had gathered first in North African ports, and had the benefit of additional preparation time. It was miraculous that this, the largest invasion fleet in history at this time, had suffered relatively little interference from the enemy.

The MTBs involved in the protection of that fleet on the morning of the invasion, 10 July 1943, left Malta during the early afternoon of 9 July and immediately met adverse sea conditions. They found themselves butting into a short steep sea whipped up by a gale force headwind. Until this Sicilian invasion, Coastal Forces in the Mediterranean tended to be made-up of individual flotillas operating separately. Now they needed to come together in a more cohesive force, capable of operating in the narrows of the Messina Straights where the larger warships, frigates and destroyers, were too big to operate with complete safety. Two boats of the 7th MTB Flotilla were fitted with the 'rumble-bumble' apparatus previously used when a feint landing was simulated during the Battle of El Alamein. This apparatus dragged underwater to create noise was used by the MTBs well north of the invasion area in the hope of confusing enemy response by indicating larger warships operating in that area.

A possible double tragedy was averted as MTBs from the 7th and the Dog Boat 32nd Flotillas fired torpedoes at what



Pantelleria and Islands off Sicily



Ships burning in Sicilian port of Palermo



The US Liberty ship Robert Rowan, carrying ammunition, hit by German bombers off Gela, the landing area

were thought to be enemy ships, but were in fact part of the Allied force. The cruisers HMS *Euryalus* and *Cleopatra*, after challenging the MTBs and obtaining no response opened fire. Just in time, a recognition response was achieved. Signals reported to be along the following lines followed; *Force Q to MTBs: you are very lucky – we were about to blow you out of the water.* Reply from MTBs: *You are even luckier – we've fired four torpedoes and missed.*

In common with all the other ships of the huge naval force that night, they met no enemy and after a long tense night they returned to Malta to prepare for the continuing round of patrols off the Sicilian coast, which would go on relentlessly

for five weeks. The MTBs had clear orders. By operating in the narrowest section of the Strait – only 3 or 4 miles wide between Sicily and the Calabrian coast of Italy – they had a good chance of engaging any enemy that appeared. It was necessary to arrive on patrol by dusk and remain till dawn, and because their patrol area was 150 miles from Malta this meant a very long total operational period, especially since the daylight return left them vulnerable to aircraft attack, and alertness had to be maintained. It was normal to be away 24 hours before returning to Malta and the added hazard of shelling from enemy shore batteries necessitated constant vigilance and rapid changes of course and speed.

On August 16/17, came the last action of the Sicilian campaign. It involved three boats of the 24th Flotilla led by Lieutenant Laurie Strong in MTB 81, with MTB 242 Lieutenant Claude Holloway and MTB 243 Lieutenant du Boulay. It was a very dark night, and the unit proceeded to within half a mile of Messina, where they stopped and cut engines. Soon after, Laurie Strong heard heavy engine noise and thought it might be the Reggio-Messina ferry. However, when the 'vessel' appeared, it was in fact two German R-boats. Strong had orders not to waste torpedoes on small targets, so he ordered a gun attack. The R-boats replied with far heavier fire-power, and MTB 81 received their concentrated broadside, MTB 243 had stopped with one engine out of action, and MTB 242 had been blocked and had briefly lost sight of other boats. As Strong, realizing he was on his own, turned away for support, a fire started on his bridge and demanded immediate attention. All

three boats received heavy damage and action was broken off with the boats returning to Augusta with a number of casualties.

On 18 August, General Patton entered Messina from the west two hours before General Montgomery arrived from the south, and the campaign was over. From a naval point of view, the huge assault armada had been delivered on time, the landings had been swiftly achieved, and the only losses had been three MTBs, one MGB and three submarines. But these, and other battles, had taken their toll: ninety-six officers and men of Coastal Forces had been killed or wounded or were posted as missing.

Now was the time for C-in-C and Captain Coastal Forces to evaluate the effectiveness of the Coastal Force contribution to the campaign. In blocking the narrow Strait of Messina while under the formidable network of searchlights and coastal batteries on both sides of the Strait, they achieved a major task, which would have been impossible for larger naval units to have undertaken without the probability of heavy losses. In the circumstances, the MTBs sailed up and down the channel night after night, and carried out their orders relentlessly. Despite the loss of some boats, in the event the enemy did not attempt to breach the blockade in any strength and Coastal Forces performed their task well and played their full part in the success of the Sicilian campaign.

BEYOND SICILY – THE RAID ON BARI HARBOUR

Following on from the invasion of Sicily the Allied Forces began the fierce struggle of landing and advancing through the Italian mainland. Despite fierce resistance from the enemy the 8th Army's advance up the Italian East Coast was rapid and the port of Bari, north of Brindisi was in Allied hands by 23 September. This allowed Coastal Forces to operate further north on the Italian coast and their support ship HMS *Vienna* was sailed to Bari as an advanced operating base. This was a strong support position as that area of the Italian East Coast was then well protected from the air due to Allied Forces capturing the major airfield complex at Foggia. German operations in the Adriatic were still strong and the use of Bari Harbour was to prove to be a vital supply and support facility for the MTBs across the Adriatic in the Allied occupied island of Vis, off the Dalmatian Coast.

Just as this operational situation began to gain strength there came an unexpected and quite devastating German raid on Bari Harbour. It was the first air raid since Allied Forces had captured the port some three months earlier and the defences were totally unprepared. By ill fortune the harbour was crammed with shipping with two complete convoys at the quays and at anchor. Six boats of the 20th and 24th MTB flotillas were also in the harbour having been detached from their flotilla operating base at Komiza, on the Yugoslavian island of Vis. Senior staff of Captain Coastal Forces and Lieutenant-Commander Morgan-Giles, Senior Naval Officer Vis were also in Bari and could not have chosen a more disastrous time to visit.

It was later realised that a reconnaissance plane, which had flown over at high altitude earlier in the day, must have carried back the information about how timely and devastating a raid would be. Just before dusk a large group of bombers came in low over the sea, beneath the radar screen, catching the AA defences by surprise. Later, a decoded German signal would indicate that 88 bombers were involved in the raid. In the few minutes over which the raid took place bombs rained down and could hardly fail to miss their target. A total of seventeen merchant ships were



Shipping under attack in Bari Harbour

sunk and many others, together with the Coastal Forces support ship HMS *Vienna* and several MTBs, were badly damaged. As it was, HMS *Vienna* was never returned to active service with Coastal Forces. An immense amount of vital material whose supply ships had endured the dangerous passage from the UK and many from the USA were lost. Supplies included food, fuel and weaponry for the 8th Army making their advance through Italy were lost, as was a large amount of support equipment for the Coastal Force flotillas. There were more than 1,000 casualties, including Italian civilians and later reports put this on the scale of the air attack on Pearl Harbour. Every one of the MTBs in the harbour distinguished itself as they applied themselves to picking-up the survivors from blazing ships and the injured from the sea. The sea was ablaze with spilt fuel and the MTBs with their wooden hulls, ammunition and high octane fuel were especially vulnerable. However, an equally great danger came from the American supply ship, the USS *John Harvey*, which was carrying a consignment of mustard gas in carboys. When the ship blew-up the contents were spread throughout the harbour.

The liquid mustard-gas which was carried upward in the blast came raining down on ships and survivors in the harbour. Many of the crews of the MTBs suffered badly and none worse than Lieutenant Claude Holloway, CO of MTB 242, Sub Lieutenant Tim (JHE) Collins, First Lieutenant of MTB 243, and his radar operator Able seaman Peter Bickmore, who were all badly burnt and spent several months in hospital. Tim Collins was awarded the MBE and Peter Bickmore the BEM for their courageous work that day.

The air raid also had an effect on the advance of the 8th Army with the loss of essential supplies holding-up the momentum of the land campaign. This was possibly one of the most damaging and adverse incidents affecting allied operations at that time.

THE ROYAL NAVY'S FIRST PATROL BOAT SQUADRON (1PBS)

We regularly report on the activities of various boats in the Royal Navy's First Patrol Boat Squadron, (1PBS) with whom our Trust has a close association. Not only are their P 2000 boats the nearest thing that the Royal Navy currently has to the MTBs, MGBs and MLs of Coastal Forces past but these current naval craft are manned by very young people, given responsibility at an early age, much like those who manned the Coastal Forces craft, during and after both World Wars. We are delighted to have an edited article from one of their Commanding Officers, with contributions from a second.

A YEAR IN THE LIFE OF A P2000 BOAT

"The Royal Navy's "First Patrol Boat Squadron" consists of 14 P2000 class patrol ships based around the United Kingdom operating in support of fourteen University Royal Navy Units (URNUs). The fourteen URNUs plus two Faslane based patrol ships and the two Gibraltar squadron boats, offer 18 command opportunities for Lieutenants along with three Executive Officer (XO) positions in the Fishery Protection Squadron and one exchange command of the Sea Cadet training ship *Jack Petchy*.

Each URNU consists of a shore-based unit, often co-located with the Officer Training Corp, or Royal Naval Reserve unit within the university campus. A P2000 is assigned to every URNU; roughly split 50/50 between those berthed in a commercial marina and those based in a naval base. The young-ish Lieutenant currently commands both unit and ship. The supporting cast comprises a CPO as Coxswain in the unit as Second in Charge. Up to four RNR list training officers support the CO and Coxswain with training on drill nights and sea weekends. Between 50-60 eager and keen undergraduates, occasionally with a few post-graduates, make up the bulk of the URNU.

On the ship, a warfare Chief Petty Officer is the Executive Officer, a marine engineer CPO is Marine Engineer Officer, a Leading Hand acts as Weapon Engineer Officer and lastly an Able Seaman is Navigator's Yeomen. A normal sea weekend or deployment will see 10 students embarked with their RNR training officer as well as the regular RN crew of 5.

The URNU tempo of operations runs in conjunction with the university academic terms. The majority of the undergraduates join during Freshers' Week, when we invite



First Patrol Boat Squadron



HMS Biter at Salford Quays

suitable students to sit a formal interview. This is not a recruiting organisation for the Royal Navy - unlike our sister organisations the University Air Squadron and the Officer Training Corps. However in practice a significant percentage of the URNU Midshipmen go on to join the RN or RM – in Birmingham URNU's case, this academic year the figure stands at 20%.

As an example of a unit not based by the sea, Birmingham URNU is based within the RNR Headquarters at HMS *Forward* in central Birmingham, whilst HMS *Exploit*, the unit's patrol ship, is based in Penarth within Cardiff Bay. The Salford and Manchester URNU boat HMS *Biter* is based an hour along the M62 at Liverpool. Other units closer to the coast are more fortunate in having boats close to the Unit. P2000s must, as a prerequisite set by Lloyds, pass an annual dry dock period of around four weeks where machinery is overhauled, surveys undertaken and following which the ship will be ready to start operations. The new intake of URNU students must attend a New Entry weekend at Britannia Royal Naval College which will involve the crucial swimming test as well as tasks introducing the wider Royal Navy ethos and traditions. Following this the students will embark on their First Year induction weekend. The students will be introduced

to navigation, seamanship, the alien concept of keeping watches throughout the night and the art of preparing a meal in the Galley, a task which often produces the greatest surprises. Each student will be given an officer cadet task-book, which they must complete over their first year to advance to Midshipman. As well as sea based training, on every Thursday night during term time the students attend an URNU drill night where navigation, drill, leadership and management are taught.

Each P2000 must complete at least 15 sea weekends per year with 10 students on each weekend, meaning in theory each student can achieve one weekend per university term. Sea weekends over the Michaelmas and Easter terms prepare the students for Easter deployment. The ship will receive an assessment visit from Squadron Staff, which is a vital time for the CO and his Ship's Company to make an impression. The Easter deployment is planned and executed without input from higher authority and will normally be staged around the British Isles with operations heavily dictated by weather.

On completion of the deployment, the ship receives a two day assessment visit from Flag Officer Sea Training, following which she will be permitted to sail on her longer summer deployment, the highlight of the year! P2000s will deploy in

small groups of 2-4 ships and be given a set geographic area to visit. This is a 6-8 week passage around Europe, split into three phases of 2-3 weeks with 10-12 students each fortnight. Often the deployment is designed to fit around other commitments, which larger ships can not fulfil. In recent years, these extra tasks have included the legendary Kiel Week regatta, representation at Armed Forces Day events and sea festivals across the UK, with the ship's company and students looking forward to these Summer events. In 2013 HMS *Exploit* undertook an eight week, 40 port visit deployment around Baltic ports. (as reported in CFHT Newsletter 14) HMS *Biter*'s Easter deployment last year took them through the Irish Sea to the Western Isles of Scotland, visiting ports from Bangor Northern Ireland to Troon and Tobermory, with an interesting and challenging transit of the Crinan Canal. In addition, P2000s have in the recent years undertaken security patrols during Operation Olympics on the Thames and at Weymouth during the Sailing Regatta, trained Britannia Royal Naval College young officers during their Initial Warfare Officers Foundation Course, taken Britannia College officer cadets to sea for their Initial Fleet Training, hosted Fleet Navigation Officer courses and supported the wider Fleet with trials, and other activity. Often the P2000 is a very visible symbol of the Royal Navy operating off the coast.

As well as visiting new places, earning money (each student is paid a Midshipmen's wage every day they wear uniform) and, in completing their task books, the students can gain qualifications from the RYA and Chartered Management Institute. Although not all will join the Royal Navy or the Royal Naval Reserve, each will leave with a greater understanding of the Senior Service and the Navy's role in our maritime nation.

The P2000 boats are currently being re-engined to increase their speed, reliability, operational life and capability. HMS *Biter* was the first to be re-engined, which increased her speed from 12 to 22 knots and the work on other boats is underway.

The P2000 patrol ship allows the Royal Navy to develop the next generation of frigate commanding officers whilst educating the potential leaders of tomorrow on maritime issues and combating sea blindness. P2000s are increasingly busy Fleet units earning a variety of tasking from standard URNU business to supporting FOST training. Overall, dealing with young people within the university environment is both demanding and extremely rewarding.

*Edited from inputs from Lieutenant Simon Shaw RN, HMS *Exploit* and Lieutenant James Smith RN, HMS *Biter*.*



HMS Biter & HMS Express at Cardiff

CLANDESTINE OPERATIONS

In Newsletter 15 we included an article about the clandestine operations undertaken by MTB 718. MTB 718 was part of the 15th MGB Flotilla, which operated under the command of Lieutenant-Commander Peter Williams DSC RNVR, Senior Officer, serving in MGB 502. The 15th MGB Flotilla worked primarily from its home base at Dartmouth, operating on behalf of Special Operations Executive (SOE). This was the element of the Secret Service formed to encourage underground activity in enemy occupied countries and the task of the 15th Flotilla was the ferrying of agents to the enemy coast and returning to England many differing types of people who needed to return to safety. The Coastal Forces craft were not natural assets for this task. They were unreliable with frequent mechanical breakdowns and a lack of navigation equipment. Also the physical characteristics of the enemy occupied coast, with rock and shoal infested waters off the north Brittany coast, the strong and variable tidal streams made their task difficult. Yet accurate rendezvous were made and embarkation spots reached by pure skill, unaided by navigation aids other than breakers marking danger. As the war progressed there was increasing enemy vigilance both onshore and at sea, particularly as the allied invasion of Europe approached.

The official history of the SOE operations in France during the Second World War refers to the number of their failures in the Channel but states that these can be offset by the undoubted success of the SOE operations code named VAR. This was a resistance-backed line of communication of considerable efficiency across beaches in the North Breton coast, operating in the winter and spring of 1943-44. The VAR operations were supported by the 15th Flotilla and the history states that some seventy people were conveyed in all on the sixteen successful VAR attempts. Another sixteen sorties were made without success; sometimes because of bad weather and other times when the beach was empty when the boat arrives. Only once was an operation aborted because of enemy interference.

The actual conduct of a sea operation was straightforward. In France, passengers for it were assembled in the same unobtrusive way as for any other escape, and brought just before nightfall to a convenient cottage near the beach. Considerable care was given to the choice of the night for the rendezvous. Moonless nights were chosen and intelligence on enemy movements was, of course, a factor.

The last thing the boats of the 15th Flotilla received before sailing was the German naval recognition signals up to midnight. It was often speculated as to how this information was obtained but it was only after the war that it became open knowledge that it resulted from one of the great scientific achievements of the war – the unravelling of “Enigma” the top secret German coding machine. Scientists were thus able to intercept and decode all the secret codes and information



MGB 502

passed by the German High Command to their fleets and Army units all over Europe. Such was the importance of this, that it was decided that the knowledge should only be used on very special occasions. If used too much, the Germans would realise we had broken into “Enigma” and this vital asset would have been lost. The recognition signals for the period after midnight were not transmitted through “Enigma” until, it is believed, about 11.30 pm and therefore not known to the Coastal Forces boats on task that particular night. The BBC warned the field in the normal coded way that the gunboat was coming or was not, if the weather turned bad. Plymouth Command cancelled its nightly anti E-Boat sweeps whenever a VAR operation sailed and the RAF provided continuous fighter cover during hours of daylight.

In addition to the choice of moonless nights, the sailings were so timed that the craft would not be within 30 miles of any enemy-held coast till two hours after sunset. Getting close to the shore was difficult and speed was always cut to reduce the sound and the wash and consequent phosphorescence.

It was a very risky business and the people in France did run awesome risks. The lives of the Coastal Forces crews and agents were very much in the hands of those French citizens, who in turn depended greatly on the professionalism of the Coastal Forces crew. There therefore developed a great mutual respect.

One of the most frequent rendezvous point for MGB 502 on the French coast was Beg-an-Fry near Morlaix, where the boat had six successful missions during the early months of 1944. The landing point was within 400 feet of an occupied German pill-box and they could often see lights flashing on the cliff top as they came close to shore. Each mission was a dangerous operation but each made an important contribution to the undercover operations taking place within enemy occupied France. MGB 502's last trip to Beg-an-Fry in the



Beg-an-Fry

spring of 1944 was undertaken with instructions to bring back two women and the rest of the party to be evacuated were to return with MTB 718. MTB 718 was also to act as an escort because the information the women were carrying was of such importance that, come what may, they had to bring them back safely. Not known to the crews was the fact that one of the women, Suzanne Charise, had with her the plans of the bunkers near Calais, which contained the V2 rockets. When interviewed after the war Suzanne Charise said that she had been handed two microfilms and the plans, and had been informed that they concerned "Hitler's West Wall". However reports after the event confirmed that these were in fact comprehensive intelligence on CROSSBOW V2 bunkers and also potential targets.

Suzanne Charise, later known as Suzanne Warenghen, was lucky to escape carrying this vital information. She had been in



*Madame Le duc with her husband Dr Le Duc
(on her immediate left) August 1944*

France as a guide and liaison agent in an evasion network and was arrested by the Gestapo at Lyon in January 1943. Transferred to Castres prison, she escaped on 10 September 1943 as part of a mass escape in company with about fifteen men and one other woman with whom she hid for three months in the Benedictine monastery of En Calcat (Dourgne-Tarn). She eventually made her way to Paris where she received the order to return to London. Leaving Paris on the evening of 14 April 1944, with the other woman and the crews of three aircraft, they took the train to Morlaix where they were taken in hand by a woman, unknown to them at that time. They entered into the restricted coastal area designated for the rendezvous in a baker's van and were the next day taken to the beach and embarked in MGB

502 on the night of 16 April, by which time Suzanne had been given her precious "cargo" to carry.

The lady who met Suzanne Charise that night and who regularly met the Coastal Forces rendezvous party on the beach at Beg-an-Fry, was Madame Le Duc, a young mother of three boys. After the war she was visited many times by Lloyd Bott CBE DSC who served as the First Lieutenant of MGB 502 through all of her clandestine operations. A memorial to these operations has since been erected on the beach at Beg-an-Fry.

MGB 502's many operations and all of those of the 15th MGB Flotilla were as important to the war effort as that described in this article. It is also of interest that on 26-27 February, 1944, MGB502 put into France, the French agent Francois Mitterand who subsequently became the President of France.



*Madame Le Duc with Lloyd Bott CBE DSC wartime
First Lieutenant of MGB 502 (1980s) at Memorial erected near
the beach at Beg-an-Fry.*

LIVES IN BRIEF

S JUSTIN COWLEY DSM*

Justin Cowley joined MTB 655 on 30 December 1942 as the twin Oerlikon gunner, while the boat was still building at William Osborne's & Son, Littlehampton. On completion of build the boat deployed for the Mediterranean, by heading out into the Atlantic, to avoid the enemy, and then East to Gibraltar and North Africa. On completion of the North African campaign the boat moved to Malta and was active in Operation Husky, the invasion of Sicily, and in intense operations at Salerno, Anzio and Elba. Following the Italian invasion MTB 655 operated from the island of Vis in the Adriatic. On the night of 17/18 June 1944 MTB 655 was involved in a major action in the Piombino Channel between Elba and the Italian mainland as enemy forces tried to evacuate from Elba. This full-scale evacuation, supported by an enemy destroyer, corvettes, F-Lighters and other warships, was opposed by just three Coastal Forces boats, including MTB 655, and one US PT Boat. Justin Cowley was awarded a DSM for his actions that night. He was to be awarded a second DSM for his actions on the night of 22/23 September when MTB 655 intercepted an enemy garrison escaping from Rogac Cove, Yugoslavia and several of the enemy ships were sunk.

MTB 655 was sunk when she struck a mine on the night of 21/22 March 1945, when commanded by Lieutenant Derrick Brown* with the loss of many members of her crew. Justin Cowley was cool-headed, accurate and an extremely brave gunner.

**Later Sir Derrick Holden-Brown and Chairman of the CFHT.*

PETER DAVIS DSC

Peter Davis led a charmed life serving in MTBs. On the night of 14/15 February 1944 he was First Lieutenant of MTB 444 (commanded by the fearless Antarctic explorer Derek Leaf). MTB 444 led a force of five MTBs into the mouth of IJmuiden harbour on the Dutch Coast and ambushed an enemy convey as it entered harbour. However, the MTBs were themselves ambushed by German E-Boats which left MTB 444 a smoking wreck. Derek Leaf died in the action and the other officer, beside Peter Davis, was seriously wounded. Davis took command in the midst of the intense action. As the rest of the force withdrew to return to Lowestoft Davis found himself wallowing off the enemy coast. He and his crew managed to restart the engines and then nurse the boat through the night towards Lowestoft, with hull smouldering and the risk of explosion fuelled by the fumes from the 100-octane fuel. The return of the boat was a result of immense determination and leadership and Peter Davis was awarded the DSC for his actions that night. MTB 444 was scuttled in Lowestoft Harbour, then eventually re-floated, refurbished and was operational again with Davis in command. The boat was lost

in the explosions and fire in Ostend Harbour on 14 February 1945. After the war Peter Davis spent time with the Royal Indian Navy and then worked as a plantation manager for Unilever in Nigeria, eventually spending many years in Africa.

JAMES SHADBOLT MBE, MID

James Shadbolt served in several MTBs and MGBs operating in the North Sea and off the coasts of enemy occupied Europe. As a young Midshipman he was First Lieutenant of MGB111, under the command of John Mathias, in the Eighth MGB Flotilla based at HMS Beehive at Felixstowe. On the night of 27/28 February 1943 MTB 111 was in company with a large party of other MTBs and MGBs, operating under the Senior Officer Lieutenant Commander Robert Hichens, and were tasked with intercepting enemy convoys off the Dutch coast. A heavily defended convoy was attacked and during the intense battle which followed MGB 79 had to be abandoned by the remainder of the force while she was heavily ablaze. Some of her crew were rescued by MGB 111, at great risk to themselves. On the night of 12/13 April 1943, once again under the command of Lieutenant Commander Robert Hichens in MGB 112, James Shadbolt's boat was one of four MGBs escorting MLs mine-laying off the Dutch coast. An enemy trawler was sighted and attacked by the MGBs. Although the trawler was severely damaged she returned fire hitting MGB112 killed Robert Hichens and severely injuring other officers in the boat. James Shadbolt was sent across his boat to assess the terrible damage on that night. He went on to serve in MTBs 430 and 412 and command MTB 483, being Mentioned in Despatches at the end of the war. After the war James Shadbolt ran a very successful family furniture manufacture business and he was extremely active in the Sea Cadet Corps in Essex, for which work he was awarded an MBE. James was also an extremely strong supporter of the Coastal Forces Heritage Trust.

ROBERT SYMES – SCHUTZMANN

Although known as Bob Symes while in Coastal Forces, he also styled himself as Baron Schutzmann Von Schutzmansdorf, a title which dated from 1407. Bob Symes was born and educated in Vienna in a strong Zionist family. He and his mother escaped from Austria in 1938, moving first to Trieste and then to Palestine. Determined to fight in the war he joined the Royal Navy and, after a period of time, he was assigned to Coastal Forces in the Eastern Mediterranean, eventually commanding an MTB. After the war he became a prominent inventor and a fine engineer with a gift for explaining complex problems. He frequently appeared as a BBC presenter on "Model World" and "Tomorrows World". Bob Symes was awarded the Knights Cross First Class from Austria and he had a Long Service Medal from his time as a special constable. *6 May 1924 – 19 Jan 2015*

BRIEF NEWS & FEEDBACK

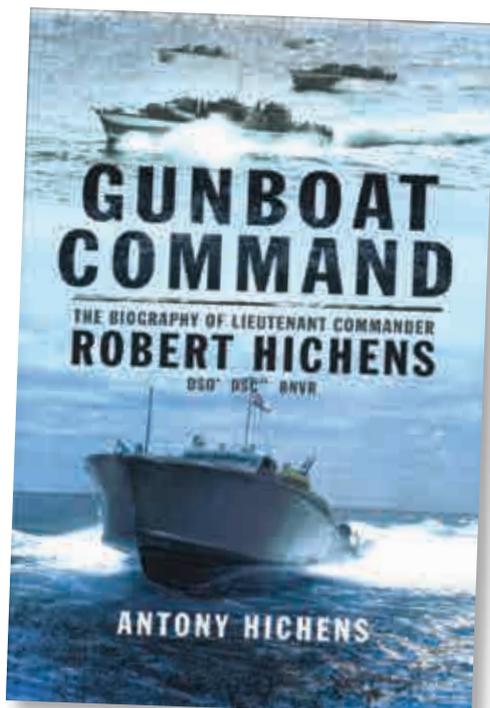
!!!STOP PRESS!!!

The 14 FEBRUARY this year was the 70TH ANNIVERSARY of the Ostend disaster in which 64 lives and 14 Coastal Forces boats were lost by the fire and explosions which swept the harbour. Details of this event were included in an article in Newsletter No 12 in May 2013.

NEW PUBLICATIONS Two new publications are available and should be of interest to readers.

GUNBOAT COMMAND

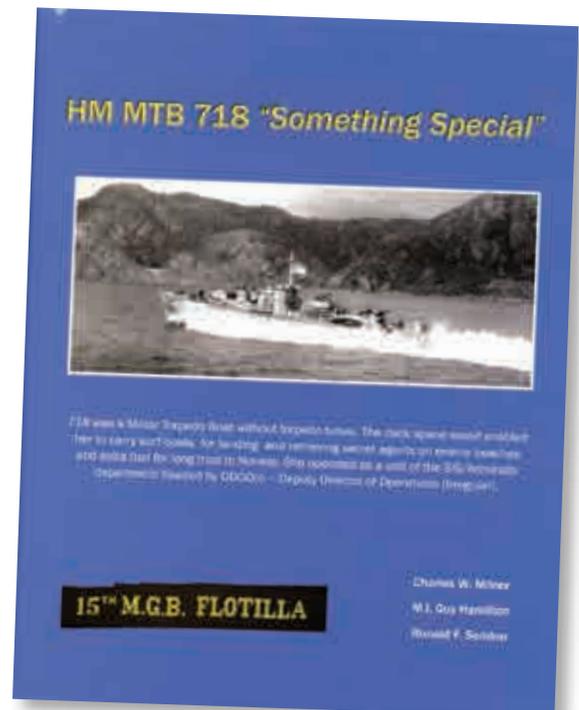
First published in 2007 in hardback this splendid biography of Lieutenant-Commander Robert Hichens DSO* DSC** RNVR, written by his son Antony Hichens, has now been republished in paperback by Pen and Sword (Maritime) ISBN 978 1 47382 296 2, at £16.99. This very well acclaimed book is the story of the most highly decorated RNVR officer in the Second World War who, in the few short years he served until his death in 1943, became the dominant figure in MGB warfare. His leadership skills and courage shaped the early years of World War II Coastal Forces in many ways. For his last but one action he was recommended for the Victoria Cross and he was three times Mentioned in Despatches. The story of his naval career is brilliantly constructed from his early war diaries and from many naval records and the Actions Reports of all his engagements.



HM MTB 718 SOMETHING SPECIAL

In Newsletter 15 we included an article on clandestine operations undertaken by MTB 718 of the 15th MGB Flotilla, specifically assigned to these secret operations. This book has been produced by the sons of the wartime commanding officer, Lieutenant Rodney Seddon DSC and the Leading Telegraphist, Charles Milner DSM and is an edited version of Charles Milner's original wartime personal accounts. The book is well illustrated with photographs and copies of documents supporting the many and various operations. The inclusion of recollections of the remaining crew members and of several of the brave agents who were passengers aboard 718, breathe life into the stories of their dangerous operations. Not only is it a quite fascinating and detailed record of the operations undertaken by MTB 718 but the reader will be intrigued by the achievements of the crew operating off the shores of enemy occupied Europe with extremely limited navigation and seamanship facilities. Their story is one of bravery and endeavour and their accomplishments were immeasurable.

It is available from York Publishing Services Limited (www.yps-publishing.co.uk) ISBN 978-0-9931445-0-9





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Justin Cowley DSM*	965	Margaret Purser	1386
Alf Crompton	2172	Donald Lefever	
Ralph J Crow	2920	Peter Morrish	3232
Peter Davis	121	Norman Newman	1682
E J Dawes MID	1977	Arthur Needs	698
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Leslie Fish	304	Charles Leslie Roberts	
W.H.E (Bill) Flint	2715	Jo Rogers	
William Harris	2830	Charles Stanley Rundle MID	1385
John B Hinchcliffe	2775	James Shadbolt OBE MID	1465
Eric Hirst	1980	Betty C Smith	1555
George Hopkins	2801	Peter Stepto	3187
David Hughes		Darrell Stirling	1779
Ronald Kyle	2907	Robert Symes - Schutzmann	
Harry J Leader DSM	1597	Eric Walker	2729
Kenneth Leigh	2472	Eva West (Nee Metcalfe)	1910
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WE WILL REMEMBER THEM

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