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NEWSLETTER



HMS Raider a P2000 patrol vessel attached to the Faslane Patrol Boat Squadron

In this edition our Project Director's report gives a clear account of our progress towards the Coastal Forces Exhibition and the successes and frustrations along the way. Our Boats Roundup reflects the disruption to some of their summer activities by the inclement weather. Nevertheless, it will be seen that their achievements continue to be quite marvellous and all deserve our support. We also have an account of the 25th Anniversary of the Gibraltar Squadron, now comprising two of the P2000 boats, HM Ships *Sabre* and *Scimitar* and the essential role they undertake. Once again we report on the splendid annual commemorative event in Vis, Croatia and explain the particular significance of this year's event. Our main articles include an account of Lieutenant-Commander Robert Hichens penultimate engagement with the enemy in February 1943, some two months before he was killed in action. It explains how close he was to being awarded a Victoria Cross and relates the circumstances which prevented the award. Other articles cover activities at the commencement of Coastal Forces, from an account of early CMB operations, to the extreme of post World War II Gay Class operations. Both articles are from those who served in those areas of operation.

Captain Trevor Robotham RN – Editor

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CHAIRMAN'S LETTER

Since our last Newsletter in May our vision of a Coastal Forces Exhibition has moved forward well. Transfer of MTB 71, our prime exhibit, into the custody of the National Museum of the Royal Navy was achieved and our fundraising in support of the Exhibition got off to a good start. All this is well explained in the Project Director's report. Also since our May Newsletter we have contributed to the production of five short films depicting major aspects of Coastal Forces history, which will be used in the refurbished No 4 Boathouse in the Heritage Dockyard at Portsmouth. The boathouse is to house the International Boatbuilding College, whose work on small craft will be on display to the public, with the Coastal Forces films as an added visitor attraction. The refurbished boathouse will be officially opened by the end of this year and we hope to report on this in our next Newsletter. In addition to moving forward with our Exhibition Project there are important anniversary dates over the coming years which we intend to commemorate with events. Next year, 2016, is undoubtedly the centenary of the foundation

of Coastal Forces in 1916 and we will ensure that this is recognised. Additionally, 2019 is the centenary of the sinking of the Bolshevik cruiser *Oleg* in Kronstadt Harbour in 1919 by Lieutenant Agar in CMB 4, resulting in his award of the Victoria Cross. We are liaising closely with the National Museum of the Royal Navy for the transfer of CMB 4 from the Imperial War Museum for it to feature in a commemorative event.

It is with regret that Miles Robinson, our Trust Secretary, has had to stand-down from both that position and as a Trustee. We are extremely grateful for the work he has done over the past three years. Also, both David Watson and Reg Ellis have stepped-down as Trustees, each for health reasons. Both were founding Trustees who have given their unstinting loyalty and support over thirty years. They will be greatly missed although all will remain closely involved in Trust activity, for which we are grateful. They deserve our sincere thanks.

Captain T Robotham RN Acting Chairman

PROJECT DIRECTOR'S REPORT

During the past 6 months a good deal of progress has been made towards our way ahead with the Coastal Forces Exhibition, despite the Project continuing to suffer frustrating delays. The Exhibition is still planned to be in the old sea mine storage building located adjacent to the NMRN's "Explosion" Museum in Gosport. The Trust has agreed with the National Museum of the Royal Navy (NMRN) to support their funding requirement for Phase One of the Exhibition. In May, Phase One of our Exhibition fund raising plan was initiated with exceptional results, having achieved our target almost 12 months early. We will be commencing Phase Two of our Exhibition fund-raising in 2016, once we see the Project work progressing. Whilst we have achieved our financial target for the Exhibition for this year, we continue to raise funds to maintain the Trust's day-to-day work and would ask all our supporters to remember us when considering charitable donations and legacies.

Central to the permanent Exhibition is MTB 71. It was transferred in April from the Imperial War Museum Duxford to the custody of the NMRN and it is now stored temporarily in the artefacts hangar at the Fleet Air Arm Museum, Yeovilton. Plans are being developed to conduct a full survey

of the vessel after which a Conservation Management Plan will be drawn up. This Plan will detail the work required to maintain the vessel as an exhibit and return its outward appearance to its wartime colours and weapons fit. In order to transport the vessel by road from RAF Duxford to the Fleet Air Arm Museum the bridge, deckhouse, weapons bandstand and torpedo tubes had to be removed.

Plans are also now well advanced for the hand over of the Trust's archive material to the NMRN. The archive will form part of the NMRN's "Sea More" project. The "Sea More" project aims to collate all RN and RM archives and digitise them. The project will also improve the digital research facilities in the NMRN's library and all hard copy material will be preserved with storage in an environmentally controlled area. This exciting project will ensure that along with the wider RN and RM history the Coastal Forces story will be preserved and easily accessible for future generations.

Despite the frustrating planning issues associated with the Exhibition building, which are out of our control, the Trust will continue to build on our existing progress by commencing work on the restoration of MTB 71 before it moves to the Exhibition.

BOATS ROUNDUP



HMS Sabre of the Royal Navy's Gibraltar Squadron
PO(PHOT) PAUL A'BARROW, MOD

The little-known Gibraltar Squadron – the Royal Navy's smallest permanent overseas seagoing unit – is celebrating its 25th anniversary. The two Fast Patrol Boats of the Royal Navy's Gibraltar Squadron, HMS *Sabre* and HMS *Scimitar* watch over Gibraltar's shores and territorial waters and support ships in the Straits of Gibraltar. The two boats, along with three Pacific Rigid Inflatable Boats, also support British exercises and operations in the area.

When sailors in Royal Navy's frigates and destroyers approach Gibraltar, few of them are likely to see the little patrol boat stationed attentively 100 yards (90m) astern or the rigid-hulled inflatable boats (RHIBs) patrolling ahead. And many of these sailors may know little about the Royal Navy's smallest, permanent, overseas seagoing unit.

After the demise of the last RAF Marine Craft Unit (No 1102) the Gibraltar Squadron was formed. The two RAF launches, *Sunderland* and *Stirling*, were then transferred to the Royal Navy and renamed HM Ships *Hart* and *Cormorant*.

These vessels continued to serve in Gibraltar, conducting an ever-increasing range of maritime tasking, before being replaced in 1991 by two of the new P2000 Class patrol vessels, HM Ships *Ranger* and *Trumpeter*, which spent a further 12 years operating from the Rock.

Following 9/11, a review of security arrangements in Gibraltar led to a further change in vessels with the Squadron taking the structure we see today. HM Ships *Sabre* and *Scimitar* have been operating in Gibraltar for eight years and the squadron is manned and maintained by just 19 Royal Naval, Royal Marine and civilian personnel.

The squadron's 25th anniversary was marked with a reception and sunset ceremony at the Tower. During the reception, Lieutenant Commander Maurice Fitzgerald, who was the first Commanding Officer of the squadron in 1985, proposed a toast to the squadron and ordered 'Up Spirits',



The rededication ceremony and reception for the Royal Navy's Gibraltar Squadron as it celebrates its 25th anniversary
CORPORAL DAVID PARNHAM, MOD

inviting everyone to join him in the toast with a glass of traditional Navy rum. Lieutenant Commander Matt Sykes, Commanding Officer of HMS *Scimitar*, said:

"We are extremely proud that the squadron has played such a key role in the waters around Gibraltar for the last 25 years".

'MILITARY BOATS' HONOURED

This group of boats restored and under restoration by the Childs family have had a busy year. The three craft in commission, HMS *Gay Archer*, ex-RASC launch *Humorist* and ex-RAF tender 437, returned to Watchet in May where their future plans were considered. After much discussion it has been decided to get HMS *Gay Archer* commercially coded so that she can be kept operational and take on public and commercial trips, which will help to keep her running and secure her future.

Meanwhile, in August Paul and Rhian Childs were honoured to receive the 2014 Transport Trust Award to "Military Boats" from HRH Prince Michael of Kent. Many congratulations to them.

Following an intense year of hull restoration in 2014, MTB 219 was launched into Bridgwater Docks in January, having been the subject of grants from both Sedgemoor District



HMS Gay Archer



Paul Childs receiving the Transport Trust Award from HRH Prince Michael of Kent



Richard Basey Skipper of MTB 102 lays a wreath at the Canadian Memorial to Coastal Forces losses at Ostend



MTB 219

Council and Bridgwater Town Council. Work has now started on making torpedo tubes and replica guns, turret and deck fittings.

The aim is to complete 219's restoration in time for the 75th anniversary of the 'Channel Dash' operation, which took place in February 1942. To celebrate her re-launch it is hoped to arrange a large community event in remembrance of those who died that day, supported with a fly-past by the Royal Navy's Historic Flight, who have indicated their willingness to attend.

MTB 102

MTB 102 has had a very busy summer. After an epic return visit to Dunkirk the boat visited Ostend where the skipper and crew had the privilege of laying a wreath on the Canadian Memorial to the Coastal Forces disaster at that base in February 1945. An explosion and then quickly spreading fire at the Coastal Forces berths, resulted in the loss of sixty lives, along with seven British and five Canadian MTBs. (reported in previous Newsletters)

MTB102 then took part in the Brightlingsea Boat Show in early July and hosted a large number of visitors. After a pleasant trip of just over 50 miles they were met at Brightlingsea by the

new Harbour Master, Captain Steve Chick, a past Commanding Officer of HMS *Illustrious*. After a short return to Lowestoft they were at sea again heading for Henley and the revitalised "Trad Boat Festival". Their trip to the Thames was successful and after a comfortable overnight stay at Hammerton they passed through the locks as far as Boveney Lock where they spent the night, followed next day by more locks, arriving at Fawley Meadow, Henley in mid afternoon. The locks on the Thames certainly tested the crew with little room for manoeuvring in and out and with some locks on a bend which increases the problem. Every lock keeper gets his photos of an unusual visitor to his lock and 102 was treated very well. There followed a leisurely trip back down the Thames to Harwich for the Sea Festival the following weekend. On arrival at Harwich they were greeted by the Harbour Master saying "I don't think it is a good idea to stay here over the next few days as the weather (wind) is going North West at over 40 knots", so after rest they headed back to Lowestoft. The forecast was fairly accurate so they made the right decision.

Weather has also resulted in planned visits to Blackwater, for a memorial event for RAF Bradwell, and to St Katherine's Dock for the Thames Festival, being cancelled. They did get to Great Yarmouth for their Maritime Festival thus ending a busy and successful operational year.

HDML 1387 "MEDUSA"

Medusa started her year by being nominated the regional National Historic Ships Flagship and has been proudly flying her broad pennant all season. They decided not to go across the channel for the D day 71st celebrations but were busy in UK waters with other events. A particular event was a day out for three former members of the Hong Kong Flotilla. Although billed as the "last patrol", it was enjoyed so much that a "last, last patrol" is already planned. In August *Medusa* escorted four "Cockleshell heroes" canoes from Hayling Island up to Northney Marina where a plaque was laid to



MTB 102 at Ostend



HMS Medusa with participants in the Cockleshell Hero celebrations



Plaque commemorating Commander Goulding CO of HMS Northney

commemorate the life of Commander Harold Goulding DSO RN who was Commanding Officer of HMS *Northney* during World War II. Commander Goulding's granddaughter had found a case of documents in the loft which shed light on his wartime activities including the period that he was head of the Special Boat Service (SBS) in its early days. He is reputed to have carried out more landings on enemy occupied shores than any other service officer.

There is not much room or water at Northney but *Medusa* successfully wriggled into a tight berth and out again. Though the forecast was variable the sky was clear and the overflight by a Spitfire and a Dakota was spectacular. She then headed West in deteriorating weather for Dartmouth to attend the regatta.

It was not to be, however, as they were stuck in Portland for several days waiting for gales to pass and, with much regret, aborted the trip and returned home. By mid September, *Medusa* was at Lymington in company with HMS *Smiler* to attend the memorial for Admiral Burrard Neale. They were made extremely welcome with a reception at the Royal Lymington Yacht Club and an invitation to the commemorative event in the town. *Medusa* was open to the public during her stay and proved very popular. Although they had planned to go round to London late October for the Lord Mayor's Pageant and remembrance this did not work out and she undertook additional sailings around our home waters. Once again, *Medusa* will be at the Hornet Remembrance.

VIS REVISITED

Over many years several of the Coastal Forces veterans who served in the Adriatic have revisited the Island of Vis for a commemorative service. We have reported this on many occasions in the Newsletter with the cry that the reported occasion may be the last. Well, May 2015 was the occasion of a re-visit with a rather special addition. The two stalwart remaining veterans of that area of wartime activity, Peter Bickmore and Reg Ellis were joined by Sir Derrick Holden-Brown. This was Sir Derrick's first return to the island of Vis and his former naval base at Komiza for 70 years. Quite a nostalgic home coming.

Derrick Holden-Brown joined the RNVR in 1941 and after initial service was appointed to Coastal Forces with his great friend Len Reynolds. In the Adriatic he was the First Lieutenant of MGB 663 until her loss by mines in September 1944. He then commanded MTB 655 which was struck by a mine midships with the boat breaking into two halves. Burning petrol spread over the sea and survivors swam away with the sea engulfed in flames. MTB 643 picked-up twenty-three survivors, including the CO, Derrick Holden-Brown, who had broken his left femur, and the First Lieutenant. Seven of the crew were missing that night and Derrick had to finish his war in hospital in Italy. He felt particularly deeply the loss of his Coxswain, Petty Officer Laurie Nicholl who had been in Coastal Forces since 1941 and had been Mentioned in Despatches in MGB 67, one of Robert Hichens' flotilla at that time. He had been awarded a DSM for an action off Cherbourg in August 1942 and, having served with Lieutenant Tommy Ladner in MGB 75, once again in Hichens' flotilla, he loyally followed Ladner to MTB 663 as his coxswain in early 1943, with Derrick Holden-Brown as First Lieutenant. He was awarded a bar to his DSM whilst in that boat and when 663 was mined and sunk in September 1944, Nicholl, although injured, once again loyally followed 663's First Lieutenant, Derrick Holden-Brown when he took command of 655. That he should lose his life in a second mining so near to the end of the war, as a result of such loyalty, was a bitter blow.

As in the commemorative events in previous years, the long list of names of the Coastal Forces losses were read-out on Komiza Jetty before wreaths were cast into the sea.

Once again the commemorative events in Vis proved to be extremely well attended by veterans families and strongly supported by both the British Embassy in Zagrab and the Croatian Navy.



Coastal Forces Veterans Peter Bickmore BEM, Reg Ellis and Sir Derrick Holden-Brown with the British Ambassador to Croatia and Defence Attaches at the British Cemetery, Vis



Veterans remember at the ceremonies on the jetty at Komiza harbour



Croatian Naval support for the commemorative events

GUNBOAT ACTION

Motor Gun Boats which formed an important and constantly developing element within Coastal Forces really started with the British Power Boats, designed by George Selman working with the entrepreneur Hubert Scott-Paine. Together with MLs and MTBs these gunboats, comprised the backbone of Coastal Forces in the early part of the war. It was in MGBs that Robert Hichens was to serve and develop his professional warfare skills which were so influential on the fledgling Coastal Forces.

This article about Robert Hichens involvement in an engagement on the night of 27/28 February 1943 describes the twelfth major Coastal Forces action in which he had been involved and was the one which preceded his death in action in April 1943. What makes the action unique is the fact that he was recommended for the award of the Victoria Cross which, for reasons which will be explained, did not transpire.

At that stage of the war in early 1943 it was the joint patrols with MTBs that perhaps gave MGBs their greatest chance of engaging in a successful action. This technique had long been advocated by Robert Hichens and was honed into a successful tactic in collaboration with MTB commander Lieutenant Peter Dickens. By 1942/43 the Germans were moving little freight by sea, but what they did move was moved at night and under heavy escort. A typical night convoy would consist of only one or two merchant ships, mainly iron ore carriers from Sweden, or return cargoes of coal, escorted by as many as six to eight warships. Thus attacks on such convoys were bloody affairs, unless they could be stalked by the torpedo carrying MTBs and sunk at a distance, which permitted the MTBs to retire safely at speed.

When MGBs and MTBs worked together the standard tactics were for the MGBs to carry out a diversionary attack, circling the convoy and its escorts at high speed, firing into them, not with the hope of doing much serious damage but with every chance of distracting enemy eyes while the MTBs came close enough to launch their torpedoes.

Such an action was fought by Robert Hichens (call sign Hitch) on the 27/28 February 1943. As Senior Officer, he took a large mixed unit over to the Dutch coast, consisting of MGBs accompanied by MTBs and minelaying MLs. He was in his own boat, MGB 77, with his good friend Lieutenant David James in command of MGB 79. There were four boats of the Fourth MTB Flotilla, under their own Senior Officer, John Weedon and three minelaying MLs of the Fifty-First Flotilla. The MGBs were to escort the minelaying MLs until they had finished their lay and were then free to look for trouble. The MTBs were to look for an enemy convoy of which Nore Command evidently had intelligence. Hitch was not in overall command but there is little doubt that it was understood that the Senior Officers of the MTBs and MLs would fall in with any request for cooperation that Hitch made.



*Lieutenant Commander
Robert Hichens RNVR*



*Lieutenant David James
RNVR*

In the story of this complex operation it is best to start with what happened first to the MTBs. Having left Felixstowe at 1615, approximately dusk, the MTBs on reaching their assigned position off the Dutch coast at 2315, had switched to auxiliary engines to achieve silence, stopping from time to time to listen on hydrophones. Twenty minutes later, MTB 70 noticed a large mine bumping down the side of the boat. It was floating very low in the water with four of its horns visible. It was of an old Dutch seven-horn type. It must have been an extraordinarily frightening moment to watch this black, sinister cylinder tapping its way down the side of the hull before disappearing into the darkness astern. The MTBs crept away at four knots, sighting no less than fourteen other mines in the process. They had by chance rendezvoused in a minefield and it must have shaken them.

Meanwhile the MLs proceeded to lay their own minefield, completing the operation at 0100 on the 28 February and then set course for home. The escorting MGBs parted company to join the search for the convoy and set hydrophone watch. Sydney Dobson, the Oerlikon loader in MGB111, remembers sitting on the foredeck with his hydrophone over the side, listening for the convoy. Only seven minutes later Sydney heard noises on the hydrophone, which he thought sounded like a large group of vessels. Hitch waited until direction and speed were clear and then proceeded on an intercepting course. MGBs, well ahead of the MTBs, saw lights ahead, strung out from north to south, including what looked like some green navigation lights approaching the Dutch coast. Why an enemy convoy in the middle of the war should have had its navigation lights on remains a mystery but they presumably felt safe so close to their base. Even more oddly, the escorting warships were all on the shoreward side of the convoy, rather than with some to seaward as one would have expected.

Hitch sent a W/T signal to the MTBs giving the enemy's position, course and speed, in the expectation that the MTBs would close and make a torpedo attack on this substantial target. Unfortunately the W/T was defective and the signal did not get through at once. Unaware of this, and unaware that the MTBs had found themselves in the middle of a minefield and had moved well to the north to get clear of it, the MGBs found themselves within three cables, 600 yards, of the oncoming merchantmen. The enemy were clearly alerted to the threat to the convoy and Hitch's attempt to shadow unobserved had clearly failed. There seemed little point in remaining under fire illuminated by star shell so the MGBs withdrew to the edge of the star shell area. Meanwhile the MTBs, having finally received the delayed enemy report from the MGBs, divided into two groups ready for a silent attack.

The MGB unit had by then lost sight of the convoy in poor visibility and the convoy had switched off its lights. Hitch suggested that he make a diversion, and he laid his boats in the path of the oncoming convoy, between it and the approach to the Hook of Holland harbour. When the enemy force approached Hitch got underway to engage. There was a sharp exchange of fire at the close range of a cable or less, with the enemy apparently hard hit as after some minutes his fire slackened considerably. Although it was the normal assumption that when going into action boats stayed in line ahead behind their Senior Officer and conformed to his movements, it was always open to an individual commanding officer who saw an opportunity he thought he ought to take to act upon it. Lieutenant David James, the last boat in line in MGB79 detached himself from the unit to engage the enemy. He ended up in desperate trouble being hit severely by gunfire from one of the escorts and the MGBs petrol tanks exploded. With her engines out of action and all power gone from the gun mountings, fire blazing from the wheelhouse, MGB 79 was helpless. The Oerlikon gunner was wounded and David James, having little else to do with the boat dead in the water, ran aft and himself fought the twin Oerlikon until the flames from the engine room made the Oerlikon position on the stern untenable. He then ordered his Lewis gunners to fire tracer into the air – the Eighth Flotilla's distress signal – went round the depth-charges removing their primers, jettisoned the confidential books and ordered his crew, who had mustered on the bows, the only part of the boat not yet in flames, to jump. The W/T office was on fire and no signal could be sent. David had little expectation that his tracer fire would be observed in the heat of the battle that was going on visibly to the west. He ordered his crew to swim some forty yards away from the blazing boat and stay together, with the life raft that had survived.

The other three MGBs having completed their turn round the stern of the enemy escorts disengaged to the north-west. When tracer was seen being fired vertically from the south-east, Hitch turned the unit round and almost at once saw a

fierce blaze from the same position, which he closed at high speed. The following are his own edited words from his Report of Proceedings:

“MGB 77 stopped thirty yards from the vessel and began to try to take the crew aboard, ordering MGB 81 to make smoke. The position was extremely unenviable since the MGBs were clearly illuminated by the ring of light caused by the fire and it was obvious that numerous enemy vessels were close by but could not be seen outside the ring of light, except that two of them, approximately a cable away, were showing single white lights which made their position clear. MGB 81 made smoke and circled again to make another burst of smoke but this was not of much avail as there was a moderate breeze from the side on which the enemy were clustered and the smoke immediately cleared.

The difficult task of getting the men on board in their heavy clothes was proceeded with MGB 77 rescuing six and MGB 111 one before the enemy's fire became so severe as to make it essential to move. The MGBs were able to remain close to the burning wreck for a matter of minutes before enemy fire commenced and more enemy vessels came in from the south-west and seeing the gunboats clearly silhouetted, opened intensive fire. MGB 77 was hit and set on fire and, as it was essential to move off, three or four men had to be left, including the two officers, seen to be clambering on to a Carley float and well positioned to be picked up by the enemy vessels.

The MGBs led by MGB 77 had picked up eight of MGB 79's crew, two of whom were wounded, and another, the motor mechanic, was immediately killed by an Oerlikon shell on board 77. All three boats were damaged and MGB 77 was hit in the engine room putting her telegraph out of action and in the tank space and several places on deck, including the W/T cabin, which caught fire. The Oerlikon shell in the tank space made a very small hole and burst inside, which is somewhat unusual with German Oerlikon shells, making numerous holes in the port tank. Fortunately the tanks did not explode.”

Thus the bare story of the rescue of most of the crew of 79 in the face of overwhelming enemy force. Fortunately Hitch's report of proceedings is not the only record we have of what happened that night. David James, in the delightful book he wrote after the war about his time in German prisoner-of-war camps and his two escapes, *A Prisoner's Progress*, in its first chapter describes how he came to be captured.

“The burning boat shed a vivid light over the whole area, while shadowy flak trawlers circled around in the wings. On this brilliantly illuminated stage, surrounded by the enemy, Hitch calmly stopped engines and started to pick up survivors. By the grace of God the enemy must have taken our rescuers for E-boats, for it was some minutes before they opened fire.

Treading water in the background awaiting my turn, I began to have high hopes of being saved, but it seemed to be a maddeningly slow business hauling chaps aboard in their thick, water-logged clothes. Suddenly realising who we were,



Robert Hichens' MGB 77

the trawlers opened up again and Hitch had to move off. He had picked up six men in circumstances of some peril; it had been a wondrous effort. I can see him still, calmly standing on the canopy directing operations. Six weeks later, at the height of his powers and fame, he was killed.”

Hitch's report of proceedings, written on the 2 March, went in under cover of a note from his commanding Officer, Commander Tommy Kerr. This in turn was forwarded to Commander-in-Chief Nore under cover of a summary by the Flag Officer in Charge, Harwich dated 8 March.

1. I consider Lieutenant Commander Hichens was right not to attack the large merchant ship with guns, which would probably only damage her, when there seemed (and in fact, there was) a good chance of the MTBs being able to sink the ship. The MTBs were unlucky not to sight her. In spite of having once been seen, the shadowing by the MGBs almost to the mouth of the Hook was a very fine bit of work.

2. Great gallantry, to the verge of rashness, was shown by Lieutenant Commander Hichens and his band of brothers in trying so hard to rescue the crew of MGB 79. Had the crew remained onboard, the rescue would have been easy.

3. A perfect torpedo target was again presented to the MGBs. The demand for torpedo tubes in the seventy-one-foot-six inch MGBs on this coast was first forwarded on the 8th October and appears still to be under discussion.

Hitch was recommended for the Victoria Cross for his actions that night. When informed by Commander Kerr of his intentions to recommend him, Hichens requested that the recommendation be dropped as he felt that he had endangered two of his flotilla boats in trying to rescue his friends. Commander Kerr respected his view and dropped the recommendation, only for it to be resubmitted six weeks later after Hitch's death. The recommendation was endorsed by Commander Kerr, Admiral Lyon, CinC Nore and Rear-Admiral Rogers, Flag Officer Harwich. The recommendation was rejected by the Admiralty, citing the same reasons Robert Hichens had himself given.

*With extracts from "Gunboat Command" by Antony Hichens –
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EARLY COASTAL FORCES OPERATIONS

From the history of FRANK HOWARD RNR

In 1917, Midshipman Howard, after a successful Gunnery Course in HMS *Excellent*, won a coveted appointment to Coastal Motor Boats (CMBs). Joining the parent ship HMS *Arrogant* at Dover in January 1918 as First Lieutenant of CMB 23, he found himself caught up in intensive training for a major operation, namely the famous raid on Zeebrugge planned by Vice-Admiral Sir Roger Keyes.

The operation had become necessary due to the enemy's successful U-Boat attacks on our shipping in the North Sea and English Channel, which would only be halted if their base port could be put out of action. Two flotillas of U-Boats were based inland at Bruges, access to which was only through Zeebrugge and Ostend. And so, on St George's Day 1918, a force led by HMS *Vindictive* was sent to demolish Zeebrugge's installations and sink blockships in order to close the port. Howard's CMB was one of the escorts for *Vindictive*. Against major shore batteries, with extraordinary gallantry and despite heavy casualties, the landing force was successful and blockships closed the main channel into the port. The CMBs were used to lay smoke screens to cover the escape of the raiding group and add to the general chaos and confusion. Although a similar raid on Ostend was unsuccessful, the Zeebrugge raid was deemed a model for the future and at the time provided a major boost to morale at home.

Here are Frank's own words in a letter home a few days afterwards: "I have been on the great Zeebrugge Stunt. It was simply glorious. I enjoyed every minute of it. I lost my cap, fountain pen and a lot of other things. I shall try to claim for some of them. The row knocked Jutland into a cocked hat.



Frank Howard RNR

It was absolutely the finest display of courage I have ever seen, to see the blockships steaming in with star shells all over the place."

Frank subsequently remained in CMBs up to the end of the war in November 1918 and the following year found himself commanding a 55ft boat armed with two torpedoes. By then the considerable instability created by the Russian Bolsheviks both to the North in the Baltic and to the South in the Caspian Sea, had led to strong British forces being deployed in both areas. In the North, Rear-Admiral Walter Cowan commanded a fleet based at Biorko in Finland, awaiting his

chance to get at the Bolshevik fleet lying securely behind the defences of the many forts and minefields in the approaches to Kronstadt. So he secretly sent for a force of CMBs which were towed across from their base at Osea Island in Essex and eventually secured alongside their mother ship *Vindictive*. She also carried RAF-manned aircraft to carry out the crucial tasks of bombing, reconnaissance and creating diversions.

The plan Cowan developed was quite simple. During a night-time diversionary bombing raid on the main harbour at Kronstadt and the ships lying there, his CMBs would skim between the forts and over the mines, enter the inner harbour and attack the Bolshevik fleet in their lair. The withdrawal, also covered from the air, would then be followed by sealing off the Gulf of Finland with minefields. Surprise was the key and the boats, sent in two waves so that any misses by the first wave could be made good by the second, had an excellent chance of writing off not only the enemy's major ships, but also of closing the port for good.

Eight boats took part. The pathfinder was Lt Agar VC in CMB 7, fresh from his June sinking of the cruiser *Oleg*. CMB 24 was to clear the approach by torpedoing a destroyer guardship, the



HMS Vindictive showing CMBs and aircraft



Coastal Motor Boat underway

Gavriel. The force was commanded by Cdr Dobson DSO in CMB 31, with CMBs 79 and 88 completing the first wave. There were also three boats CMBs 62, 86 and 72 in the second wave. Curiously, Frank Howard, only an Acting Sub Lt RNR at the time, was the CO of CMB 86 with an RN Sub Lt as 1st Lt and an RN Lt Cdr as Engineer! Clearly Howard's previous experience was highly regarded. Each boat had specific targets of battleships or dry docks, with back-up orders in case of misses.

Here are Frank's recollections of the operation. "On the Sunday morning we went alongside *Vindictive* to get ready for that night. My starboard engine was only running on six cylinders, which meant we only had half power. We worked on it all day but it was no good. We started out with the rest but I had been told if I did not have the speed I was not to go into the harbour but patrol outside and help to cover the withdrawal. To enter the harbour I needed two engines for the tight turns and I could only fire torpedoes at high speed or otherwise they plunged and exploded beneath us. Our newly married Engineer (Francis Yates) very sportingly came with us as we were a lame duck. We did have to stop soon after we started but the flotilla waited to allow stragglers to catch up. It was cloudy but calm and after passing the second line of forts, still undetected, there was a frightful jarring and the whole boat vibrated. I thought we had grounded but the port engine had a broken crankshaft so we started the other one and reluctantly turned for home at only 7 knots.

As we reached the chain of forts two boats streaked past going flat out and I thought it better not to attract their attention as all three of us might get sunk rather than just us. Although under fire we were only hit badly once but as we were passing the big fort CMB 72, driven by Sub Lt Bodley RNR, and us in 86 were caught by a searchlight. He stopped and began to tow us but the lines parted almost immediately so I decided not to tow again until we were out of range. The big Fort Alexander now started shooting with 7.5 inch HE which was pretty gummy as the shooting was rather good. My Sub (Wight) distinguished himself by getting the towing gear ready almost single-handedly and we resumed when we were out of range, at about 0300. When past the minefields the destroyer *Wessex* took over and we got back to *Vindictive* at 0745 and I turned in."



Kronstadt, west of Saint Petersburg in the Gulf of Finland

The 18-year-old pilot of one of the covering aircraft, Lt Fairbrother, takes up the story. "Three CMBs were speeding for home before the enemy had realised surface craft were engaged at all, so successful had been the aerial attack. It was only when a damaged CMB (86) was caught in a searchlight beam that they realised the explosions in the harbour were not caused by bombs but by torpedoes. And now we come to the most heroic deed of a day of heroism. We were trying hard to put out the searchlights and out of the dark came the last of the CMBs with her steering gear damaged and only one engine. She came alongside a sister to try a tow and, even though under fire, both boats engaged the forts with their machine guns. Eventually they got going and were out of range by the time we had to scoot for home as we were running short of petrol. We got back just in time to cheer in the two boats brought home by a destroyer."

As a result of the damage caused to the capital ships in the harbour, the whole operation achieved its original aim, for the Bolshevik fleet took no further part before the British withdrawal a few months later. Of the seven boats which got through only four returned. There were many deaths and casualties, including some left behind as prisoners. Subsequent gallantry awards included 2 VCs, 5 DSOs, 6 DSCs, a DFC and 15 DSMs.

Frank Howard completes the tale. "Next day we were towed down to Revel (now Tallinn), a foul trip of 14 hours, which we reached at 11 pm. I thought: Ah! a bath and turn in. But no. The destroyer told us to go into the harbour because everyone was waiting for us. Then we saw that every ship in the fleet had all their searchlights on, all hands were on deck and they were all cheering themselves hoarse. After we came alongside I got on board and was carried down to the wardroom where the subsequent party lasted for over an hour! At last we had a bath and turned in."

With thanks to Captain Vincent Howard RN

THE GAY CLASS FAST PATROL BOATS

Following the fighting experience from World War II it was clear that the development of British fast attack craft needed to change in two fundamental ways. Firstly, the 100-octane petrol engine was too vulnerable and secondly, boats needed to be able to multi-task, as it is called today. So in February 1951 the Admiralty ordered an in-house designed class of boat, the Dark Class, with Napier Deltic diesel engines and the ability to act as a gunboat, or as a torpedo boat, or a mixture of both, with the added capability of laying ground mines when required. But there was an immediate problem as their chosen diesel engine was not yet ready for marine use. And so the Gay Class were ordered to fill the gap until the diesel boats were ready. Based on the latest Vosper "Short" boat design, with some Admiralty input, the boat was 75ft long with a hard-chine planeing hull powered by three petrol engines and could adopt a variety of armament configurations.

The first boat, *Gay Bombardier*, arrived in February 1953 and after thorough trials four of them *Gay Forester*, *Gay Charioteer*, *Gay Carabineer* and *Gay Archer* formed the 2nd Fast Patrol Boat Squadron based at HMS *Hornet* in Gosport, alongside the 1st Squadron of the old Fairmile "Dog" boats. This four-boat squadron remained operational until late 1956, with other boats of the class joining and leaving as their serviceability required.



HMS Gay Bombardier P1042

They included *Gay Bowman*, *Gay Cavalier*, *Gay Fencer*, *Gay Bombardier* and *Gay Centurian*. Crewed by 3 officers and 12 ratings, their normal armament comprised two 21" torpedo tubes with 2" rocket flare projectors fitted on a saddle mounted atop the tubes, a 40mm Bofors forward, plus smoke or flare kit on the stern. In the gunboat role they had a 4.5in short-barrel gun forward, and a Bofors or 20mm Oerlikon aft. They could also be fitted for minelaying. An early design problem appeared when it was found they could not attain the designed speeds due to the stern "digging in" and preventing the hull reaching a full planing attitude. So a fixed metal flap was attached at the foot of the stern,



HMS Gay Bruiser showing weapons fit

slightly angled down, which effectively extended the length of the hull and this overcame the problem. The boats were now able to reach the desired cruising and top speeds of 28 and 40 plus knots respectively. A “dry” boat straight off the slip is reputed to have reached 43 knots.

The two operational squadrons were kept pretty busy. Each year the highlight was an annual NATO exercise with the Danish E-Boats and Norwegian Elcos. Night-time operating lasting over several weeks and taking place in the three countries’ waters, the exercises included mock torpedo attacks on shipping, gun battles against rival CF craft and practising the arts of camouflage alongside a remote pier or even a mountain, to be checked the following day by photo reconnaissance aircraft. It was quite an arduous programme with the crews living throughout in their boats rather than ashore as they did when back home in *Hornet*. To prepare for this vital NATO commitment also required a busy training schedule for most of the rest of the year. Dummy torpedo firings, gun crew training, high speed navigation and cruising tactics and even the depth charge under the bows attack, all these skills had to be thoroughly learnt to reach and maintain the best operational standards. Almost all of this of course took place at night with the occasional bonus of a full-blown attack on the Home Fleet if it was brave enough to pass south of the Isle of Wight after dark!



HMS Gay Archer after grounding off Southsea

With such a programme came the hazards of operating at speed and this did lead to the occasional accident, collision or grounding. One such grounding off Southsea beach in January 1956 brought a near sinking, rescued just in time by a nearby dockyard tug.

In the base at *Hornet* the shore staff were also extremely busy keeping all the boats operational and it was not unusual for a defective boat to come in from a night exercise in the early hours and be hauled straight up onto the slip in order to



Officers and Crew of Gay Class Fast Patrol Boats 1955

be fit for sea again the next day. There was some respite during the summer, with each squadron allowed a week or so to join the Navy's showing the flag programme by making home or foreign visits to small coastal towns, villages up rivers or on the European canals, which were not accessible to larger warships. Favourites included Honfleur, Trouville, St Malo, Scheveningen, Cork and of course the Isles of Scilly or the Channel Islands. Particular highlights included visits up the River Thames to London escorting the Queen on her return from the 1954 Commonwealth Tour and several Heads of State on formal visits to the UK. Partaking in Navy Days was also special. More unusual activities included taking part in an

advertising film for "Senior Service" cigarettes in late 1955 and featuring, in the case of *Gay Dragoon*, in the film "The Ship That Died Of Shame" in October 1954.

The Gay Class boats were eventually replaced in late 1956 by the diesel-engined Dark Class, but in the few years when they were in commission they had proved more than capable craft, having led a full and useful life to keep alive the fighting skills of the Coastal Forces of the Royal Navy. Three of the class stayed in commission at Devonport as Fast Target Towing boats for some years afterwards. The Gays were very popular with their crews; as one ex-member remarked in 2009 "I would do it all again tomorrow, given the chance"!

LIVES IN BRIEF

DANIEL PATRICK MACNEE

Patrick Macnee who died on 25 June this year will, of course, be much better known for his acting career than the time he spent in Coastal Forces in World War II. As a Midshipman he served in MTB 434 (ex MGB 115) under the command of Sub-Lieutenant Eric Archer RNVR. MTB 434 was in the 1st MTB Flotilla, which was previously designated the 8th MGB Flotilla, under the overall command of Robert Hichens. The boat was lost off Le Havre on 9 July 1944 with the loss of only one member of crew, a stoker. Fortunately Patrick Macnee had been taken ill shortly before D-Day and was not onboard at the time. Subsequently Patrick Macnee moved to MTB 413 (ex MGB 75) and then MTB 416 (originally MGB 81), which has been restored and currently operates as a heritage craft from the Portsmouth Historic Dockyard. He completed the war as First Lieutenant of MTB 506. His post war acting career was long and distinguished, not only in the UK but in Canada and

America playing opposite many other distinguished actors, including Christopher Lee and David Niven. He came from a very eccentric family background (Telegraph Obituaries 26 June 2015) and he eventually settled in Palm Springs, California, where he said life was less repressive.

WALLIS RANDALL

Many will remember Wallis Randall who died on 9 June this year. Wallis was a long-standing member of the CFVA London Branch and its one time Vice Chairman. Wallis will best be remembered as the CFVA Librarian who, with his wife Edna, contributed to Veterans' reunions with the display of his comprehensive collection of Coastal Forces books. Wallis and his Library also enhanced the Coastal Forces stand at two "International Festivals of the Sea" and numerous other events. Always cheerful and extremely helpful Wallis could also be relied upon to ask the difficult questions at veterans' gatherings.

BRIEF NEWS & FEEDBACK

WORLD WAR II COASTAL FORCES CRAFT

The Project Director is compiling for the National Museum of the Royal Navy an up-to-date record of all remaining World War II Coastal Forces craft. This record also includes equipments, weapons and any ship parts from these craft. Any assistance in identifying the location of vessels or equipments would be most welcome and information should be forwarded to CFHT at our registered office, shown on the back sheet of this Newsletter.

COASTAL FORCES MODELS

As the Coastal Forces Exhibition Project develops we intend to tell the story partly through the use of models of the whole range of Coastal Forces craft. The Trust already holds a good collection of models although this is not a complete range of the World War II and post war craft built. We are therefore always seeking the opportunity to acquire additional ones to help in telling the Coastal Forces story. Anyone who has a good quality model which they feel able to offer to the Trust for display in the Exhibition should contact the trust office. We would be most grateful for your support.

IN MEMORIAM

WE SAY FAREWELL TO:

	CFVA Membership		CFVA Membership
Frederick Walter Atkins	1000	George Edgar Laity	1171
James A Batten	1932	Colin Leslie	219
Graham Blackman	1740	James Norman Main	2547
Gerald Butt	3289	J M McLean	350
Cyril Curtis	2921	Daniel Patrick Macnee	
Henry G Curtis DSM	2056	Alexander Monro DSM	508
Yvonne Downer		Colin Morris	2641
H C H du Boulay DSC	738	Arthur Needs	698
K Dyer		D G Norman	
Norman John Faller	1149	TC (Terry) Parker	373
Peter Fenwick-Smith	1565	Michael Pollard	2854
Wilfred Faulds	896	W Randall (CFVA Librarian)	415
H D C Gibson		Joe Roberts	3031
Jack Gowen		Kathleen Stanbrook	1753
Mollie Hickey		Darrell Sterling	1779
John Hosegood	2747	Gerald Styles	1854
Laurence Johnson	2091	Keith Symonds OBE	3110
John Kilby	1646	Ivor Walter Wharmby	1707
G S Knowles	286	Martin Willoughby	
A R (Clem) Letchford			

WE WILL REMEMBER THEM



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Lieutenant Commander Peter Cunningham RN

Administrator: Jonathan Kemp

Objectives 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 the restoration and permanent display, for public
benefit, of Coastal Forces craft together with relevant
artefacts, records and memorabilia relating to such craft,
and those who served therein.



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