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NEWSLETTER



MTB102 at Speed, 1939/1940

In these strange, uncertain and, frankly, quite frightening times – perhaps the greatest peacetime crisis we have ever faced – it might be appropriate to draw inspiration from some of the most heroic Coastal Forces actions during the darkest times of the Second World War, when, figuratively, this country was on its knees and we were fighting “with backs against the wall”. The historic accounts in this newsletter have a common theme – outstanding valour, audacious nerve and pugnacious determination against overwhelming odds. Seen as unmitigated naval disasters at the time but, with the wisdom of historical hindsight, we can see that important strategic benefits and lessons would emerge.

MTB 102, which is preserved and still seaworthy, played a key role in the Dunkirk evacuation in May/June 1940. Her story encapsulates the highest ideals and traditions of the Coastal Forces. This diminutive warship crossed the Channel eight times and acted as flagship for Rear Admiral Wake-Walker when his flagship was damaged by enemy action. It is in tribute to her that there is a photograph of her above and there is an article about MTB 102 by Richard Basey who heads up the MTB 102 Trust on pages We include an article recounting the heroic but hopeless engagement between the Second Flotilla and the

massive Japanese forces invading Hong Kong at the end of 1942. We re-tell the story of the Coastal Forces gallant but hopeless attacks on German capital ships, two battleships and a heavy cruiser, as they made fast passage up the English Channel to home ports in Germany (“The Channel Dash”).

We include an account of the extraordinary, daring attack by three Fairmile ‘D’ Class boats, “Dog” Boats, against a major Axis Base in Tunisia in April 1943. The disproportionate successes of this engagement re-enforced to naval high command the potential of these small “light” forces to have significant impact, particularly close inshore where major warships could not deploy.

I conclude, as I did in this newsletter 6 months ago, by saying I feel sure that all the Trustees would wish me to pass on their good wishes to all our readership and supporters. We hope that you have come through these last few months and will continue safe and well. We remain aware of the importance of communications and hope is that this newsletter will be a reminder that you remain part of the Coastal Forces “family” There is more; read on, enjoy.

Commander Rupert Head, Royal Navy – Editor

It is with deep regret that we must report that John Ascoli passed peacefully at his home in West Wittering on Sunday 27 September. John was very closely involved with the Coastal Forces Trust for many years and, indeed, led the Trust for about eight years as the Chairman of Trustees. His commitment and inspiration to the Trust over many years were remarkable and he will be greatly missed. There will, of course, be full and fitting tribute to John in the next newsletter and, although nothing can be planned at the moment, the family is, we understand, considering a memorial service when this becomes possible.

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CHAIRMAN'S LETTER

This year is probably not one on which we will look back on with pleasure; twelve months ago none of us could have envisaged a pandemic and the far-reaching impact COVID19 has had – and will continue to have – on all our lives.

First, I want to use this newsletter (as virtually our only means of communicating with our supporters) to extend the Trust's condolences to anyone who has lost a member of their family or friend. I also extend our best wishes to those of you who have suffered from this debilitating virus, or, indeed, who have found the constraints of enforced lockdown a source of loneliness and stress. I need hardly say, the last eight or so months have been horrible. But I hope this newsletter will turn us away, for a few moments at least, from 2020 and instead spark a note of optimism and pride as this newsletter looks back to some of the compelling, gallant Coastal Forces stories during the darkest days of the Second World War when this country faced a monumental struggle against fascism.

Turning to a very positive note, I am delighted to report that, even with the constraints on the building industry over the last 6 months, the major conversion work of Building 'P' at Priddy's Hard, Gosport has continued apace and is well on track for the hand over to our Naval Museum partners who

will then take over the next phase, transforming this building into an impressive, state-of-the-art museum. The two historic boats, MTB 71 and MTB 331, will be transported to their new home before the end of the year. The photographs accompanying the project update on page show just how far the work has progressed. I am very encouraged.

I am also pleased by the news that a few months ago the Admiralty Board decided to rename the First Patrol Boat Squadron (of which our readership will be very familiar) to the Coastal Forces Squadron, So "Coastal Forces" emerges, Phoenix-like, on the Royal Navy's order of battle. We are grateful to the CFS for a vivid account of a most successful recent deployment to the Western Isles and Northern Ireland (pages ...).

In our next newsletter we will be publishing a full tribute to John Ascoli, Trustee and former Chairman of the CFHT. John passed away in September and we will greatly miss his wisdom and counsel. We send heartfelt condolences to his family.

Finally, I and all at the Coastal Forces Heritage Trust send best wishes to all our readership and the hope that 2021 will be a better year for the entire world.

Vice Admiral Sir Paul Haddacks

THE COASTAL FORCES MUSEUM PROJECT

Past newsletters have carried regular updates on the Trust's core project, establishing a museum to tell the story of Coastal Forces. For some years this project has been one of hopes and aspirations and very little concrete (no pun) progress. We can now report that the project has moved on substantially. In spite of recent restrictions within the building industry, the major conversion work of 'P' Building at Priddy's Hard as

continued unabated, as well illustrated in these three photographs. This is an impressive space and it is a solid, substantial building. It was purpose built for the storage of mines and, interestingly, the recent enlargement of the double doors at one end (so the historic boats can be moved in) was a much more difficult operation than expected. This was because of the building's closely interlocking brickwork; the walls were

specifically strengthened in this way so that in the event of major disaster a blast would go upwards through the roof.

It is hoped that our two historic boats, MTB 71 and MTB 331, will be moved by road from Yeovilton in Somerset to

Priddy's Hard before Christmas; this expensive and difficult operation will require careful planning.

So we are on course and things are looking good. The photographs below tell the story better than further words.



BOATS ROUND-UP AND NEWS

MTB 102 – A DIMINUTIVE WARSHIP WITH A VITAL ROLE AT DUNKIRK

MTB 102 has not had as much cover in our newsletters as she deserves. Whilst 102 has not, of course, had a full programme in 2020, many readers will have seen her over the years at various maritime commemorative events and she has played centre role in the Dunkirk “Little Ships” commemorations. She is a Coastal Forces boat with an illustrious and fascinating history. Not only is she preserved in immaculate condition, she is also one of the few remaining seagoing historic boats. Owned by a charitable trust, she is operated by Richard Basey and under his inspiring leadership and dedication, a small crew of volunteers keep her in this remarkable condition. Although she has been re-engined several times, she still has much of her original fabric and fittings.

Designed by Commander Peter Du Cane, CBE, the Managing Director of Vosper Ltd., she was built by the company as a prototype; she was to be the first of many others to be built to this very successful design. In 1940 she made eight crossings to the Dunkirk beaches, under the command of Lieutenant Christopher Dreyer, in that epic evacuation, codenamed Operation Dynamo. She was mainly used as a Dispatch Boat running between Dover and Dunkirk and around the beaches and harbours. In the prevailing disordered and dangerous conditions it was essential for Flag Officer Dover, Vice Admiral Bertram Ramsey, to be able to get messages across the Channel to the Naval Officer in Charge (NOIC), Captain William Tennant and the Flag Officer Afloat Dunkirk, Rear Admiral William Wake-Walker. MTB 102 carried Admiral Wake-Walker on several occasions and the torpedo rating, Leading Seaman Peter Dawkins, made an Admiral’s flag for him out of a pusser’s dish cloth and with the use

of red paint. The flag was flown whenever he was aboard and it was presented to him on completion of the Dunkirk operations. Captain Christopher Wake-Walker RN, the Admiral’s son, presented the Flag back to the crew of 102 some years later and it survives as a cherished relic in a glass frame onboard.

Her wartime service from 1943 continued in the Army Fleet but in 1944 she again assumed an important role; carrying the prime Minister, Winston Churchill, and General Eisenhower to review the assembled invasion fleet before Operation Overlord. Post war she was first sold to become a private pleasure craft. In 1973 she was bought by a Norfolk Scout Group as their training ship. In 1976 she was partly re-furbished to play a role in the film, *The Eagle has Landed* and then the Dutch film, *Soldier of Orange*. She played an important role in the Thames Pageant for Queen Elizabeth II Silver Jubilee.

Her engines have changed through the years. Her original Isotta Fraschini engines were replaced with two Perkins P6s and these in turn by the donation of two 9ltr V8 engines by Perkins Ltd in 1985, and then with the purchase of Cummins engines in 1996 and again in 2002. In 1996 she was acquired by enthusiasts led by Richard Basey who established the MTB 102 Charitable Trust which continues to own, maintain and operate the boat so successfully until the present day. She was privileged to lead the procession of Heritage Craft taking part in the Queen’s Diamond Jubilee Pageant on the Thames in 2012 and she played herself in the recent film *Dunkirk*. Her Patron is Admiral Sir Jonathan Band GCB DL, the former First Sea Lord.

The MTB 102 Charitable Trust always welcomes new supporters and depends greatly on their generosity.



MTB 102 taking part in The Thames Pageant for The Diamond Jubilee



Rear Admiral Wake-Walker's Flag

MEDUSA CLOSE UP

As you will all appreciate, there is little to report about the summer activities of the historic boats. Medusa is well loved and well known, so we thought we would test the observation and knowledge of the many readers who, at various times, have seen her and been onboard. See how many of these shipboard “mystery objects” you can identify and decide too where onboard the vessel each is to be found. The answers are on page 15.

One deduction from this light-hearted quiz is that, in addition to the fabric of this historic boat, as seen from outboard, there is a wealth of historic attention to detail onboard as well – all these objects are genuine and originate from the Navy of some 70 or 80 years ago. *(From the Editor: I recognise a few of these from my early navy days which is seriously aging!)*



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 9



Figure 10



Figure 11



Figure 12

MTB 539 – RE-DISCOVERED 120 FEET DOWN

MTB 539 was a post-war boat with an interesting pedigree. She looked like a Second World War Two Vospers-designed boat but she was, in fact, designed and built by the Saunders Roe company on the Menai Straits shortly after the war; Saunders Roe was renowned for building aircraft, and flying boats in particular. 539 was an experimental boat and unusual in that her hull was totally built of aluminium. She was therefore very light and, with three 1500 horsepower Packard engines, she would have reached an impressive speed of between 45 and 50 knots. Like the “Dark” and “Gay” classes which were coming into service in the early 1950’s, she was designed to carry up to four torpedo tubes, with the option of gun weaponry as alternatives to torpedoes for conversion to the gunboat role. After completion in 1948, she came south to her base, HMS HORNET in Gosport, and became a trials boat. It appears that trials did not go well and that she was plagued with technical problems. (Her only claim to fame was to appear in the David Niven film Appointment with Venus in 1951 when she played a German E-Boat)

After three years of problems, it was decided that she needed to be taken back to Saunders Roe for extensive remedial work and modifications. With a history of engine problems, she had to be towed back by an Admiralty tug. She never made it. Coming around the north east coast of Anglesey in a gale, one of the large Packard engines left its mount and punctured a hole in the hull. The tow rope parted and 539 sank very quickly. Fortunately, no one was onboard. This should have been the end of the story but it wasn’t. The wreck of 539 has been recently discovered 9 miles north east of Point Lynas, Anglesey in 120

foot of water. The Bangor School of Ocean Sciences from Bangor University working on their survey vessel Prince Madog has positioned and identified the wreck using a multi-scan sonar. The remarkable thing is that 539 is still very much intact and, being at 120 foot, divers have been down to confirm her identity. They report that tidal flow has polished the aluminium hull to a shiny finish. It seems that even after 70 years on the seabed, this unique Coastal Forces vessel is still of historical significance and could at some point in the future be raised to become part of the small fleet of preserved historic Coastal Forces vessels (She is not, of course, a war grave and would be small enough to be lifted). In the meantime, the University of Bangor School of Ocean Sciences, under the direction of Professor Mike Roberts, has embarked upon an ambitious programme to re-map and identify the 300 or so shipwrecks between Pembrokeshire and the Great Orme Head; at present the identity of the majority is unknown but many will have their own stories of tragedy, disaster and perhaps heroism.



ABOVE MTB 539’s classic outline on Side Scan Sonar

BELOW An MTB – Reputed to be 539 – at speed





Carron Narrows en route to Fort William

COASTAL FORCES SQUADRON 2020 DEPLOYMENT

*“Read me a lesson, Muse, and speak it loud
Upon the top of Nevis, blind in mist!”*

JOHN KEATS, WRITTEN UPON THE TOP OF BEN NEVIS

Two centuries have passed since poet John Keats implored the highest mountain in Great Britain for a meaningful ‘lesson’ and yet the crew of HMS BITER found themselves similarly wanting during their visit to the mighty Munro in July 2020. The imposing summit of Nevis looms over the town of Fort William and Loch Linnhe where their ship is berthed, as it so familiarly loomed over the vessels attached to Coastal Forces training establishment, HMS St Christopher nearly 80 years before. Today only a few outbuildings and a modest memorial remain of HMS St Christopher, but as BITER and her ships in company once again fly the flag of Coastal Forces in the loch, we are reminded of the enduring significance of our Coastal Forces predecessors.

Fort William was a cultural headmark for the three ships HMS BITER, HMS CHARGER and HMS EXPRESS deploying to the Western Isles of Scotland in summer 2020 to conduct navigational training and maintain operational readiness for Royal Navy tasking; not least because the Royal Navy learns a lot from looking back when going forward. During our time in

Fort William, we took time to reflect on the parallels between then and now and what it means to be of the Coastal Forces cadre (Admittedly, though the white ensign prevailed against the crags of the Loch Linnhe shoreline, we were wanting of the Blackburn Skuas that our forefathers would often send screaming across this surprisingly deep stretch of water...).

It is, of course, true that the identity of Coastal Forces looks a little different in the twenty first century. However, operating in an area so imbued with this heritage, there is less divergence than we might imagine. Running for several weeks out of the Scottish Isles, we were cognisant of the flexibility of our vessels and our capacity to operate in constrained and littoral waters, using our environment to derive tactical advantage the boats of Coastal Forces had done so many years before... and yet we are similarly aware of our vulnerability as small craft in the unforgiving elements, be they the exposure of the south Minch or the swirling grasp of an ill-timed Corryvreckan. This duality of flex and risk is what made Coastal Forces so potent in previous conflicts and what has sustained their relevance to the present day; everyone likes a lot of “bang for their buck” and with these small ships the Royal Navy knew that they could have a large impact.

Today our armoury is not torpedoes, but trainees; we use these craft to train the destroyer and submarine captains of the future by driving them into navigational challenge, tactical difficulty and demand for quick decisions with a limited crew.



All units alongside at Kyle of Loch Alsh

During this particular deployment these ships transited the likes of the Kyle of Rhea, conducted winching exercises with the Stornoway Coastguard, engaged in high speed multi-ship manoeuvres in constrained waters and learned lessons in everything from seamanship minutia to submarine ranging technique... no mean feat for minor war vessels of less than 20 metres in length.

Beginning in Bangor, Northern Ireland, the team hosted the Mayor of Bangor and conducted training in Belfast Lough before proceeding to Port Ellen, our first Scottish stop. Following a short stop where they received a warm welcome from the local people in what has been a very quiet season for the yacht-haven town, the ships proceeded north up the Sound of Islay conducting coastal navigation training and emergency-based exercises. A transit to Oban followed where the crews engaged virtually on social media platforms with the local Sea Cadet unit before pushing on to Fort William to pay our respects to HMS St Christopher and climb the Ben as a collective crew. Stops in Kyle of Loch Alsh and Ullapool followed before the team sprinted across the Minch to Stornoway. A VIP visit for the Lord Lieutenant of the Western Isles and a commemoration ceremony in remembrance of Iolaire was conducted in Stornoway before a giant push towards Mull and Tobermory (Loch Boisdale unfortunately was a no-go due to conditions in the Atlantic and so we had to be satisfied with a single Hebrides stop). Our Scottish adventure over, the ships scanned Giant's Causeway from the sea en route to Ballycastle, Northern Ireland before proceeding back to Belfast Lough for an entry into Carrickfergus where

they hosted dignitaries and senior military officials in the announcement of the town as the lead for Armed Forces Day Northern Ireland 2021.

From Kintyre to Lewis, you'd be forgiven for thinking that we were content to fly the flag and ride the waves in the name of the Archer class this summer, but the strength in Coastal Forces today lies not only with their tactical flex at sea, but primarily their ability to reach beyond traditional Royal Navy haunts and engage with the wider populace. During the summer deployment, HMS BITER was proud to host the Lord Lieutenants of the Western Isles and Argyll and Bute respectively, to escort 'Rowing Roy' a charitable record-attempt to row, unassisted, a full circumnavigation of the British Isles, meet with RNLI volunteers, Sea Cadets and local mariners alike. To be afforded the opportunity to meet and understand the people who share our maritime environment – and have done for centuries - gave us true insight into what 'Coastal' really means. From Loch to Lough and Sound to Skerries, we continue to deliver as our forefathers have done, delivering "punch" in areas where the Royal Navy larger ship draughts may deny them access. Our cap covers may be different to those in the 1940s, likewise the demands on us on the world stage, but the continuity of the quintessential essence of Coastal Forces – flex, innovation, daring – persist within the Coastal Forces Squadron of today; if the time came you could make Robert Hitchens' of us yet.

With thanks to Lieutenant Becky Anderson, Commanding Officer, HMS BITER, and the Coastal Forces Squadron

THE GALLANT, TRAGIC SECOND FLOTILLA

By the mid-1930's and with the distinct possibility of war, the Admiralty finally woke up to the tactical potential of small, fast naval craft, armed with a decisive offensive weapon, the torpedo. After a certain amount of deliberation and extensive trials, a British Power Boat Company design was selected. The initial order was for 18 boats. These would be deployed to the major bases overseas. The 1st and 3rd MTB Flotilla went to Malta (with the intention that the latter would continue on to Singapore in due course) The 2nd Flotilla, MTB numbers 07-12, were shipped out to Hong Kong, where they were joined by MTBs 26 and 27 from the China Station.

These early World War Two boats were 60 foot in length, had a crew of 9, and were powered by three Napier Sea Lion engines giving them a top speed of between 35 and 38 knots (but only in benign conditions – no more than sea state 4 to 5) The “main armament” consisted of two 18 inch torpedoes which were launched down stern ramps, a somewhat old fashioned and cumbersome method which harked back to the First World War boats. There were, in addition for close range defence, two sets of quadruple .303 inch machine guns. Needless to say, the boats were highly vulnerable to incoming fire (not helped with fuel tanks full of high octane petrol).

The story of the First Flotilla's epic journey from Malta across the Mediterranean, through French inland waterways and finally back to UK, shortly after outbreak of war, is well known. The tragic demise of the Hong Kong Second Flotilla at the end of 1941 seems to have been largely forgotten, perhaps because it was, indeed, a disaster but also because it was lost in the general “fog of war” (The loss of HMS REPULSE and PRINCE OF WALES occurred around this time too and, not surprisingly, grabbed all the attention in UK.)

On 8th December 1941, as part of the simultaneous combined attack against Pearl Harbour, the Imperial Japanese Army invaded the Philippines, Thailand, Malaysia and the British colony of Hong Kong. Churchill, recognising at the outset of hostilities with Japan that Hong Kong was a lost cause and with few military assets in theatre, left Hong Kong to its fate. After only 18 days of battle the defenders, consisting in the main of a weak, undermanned brigade, were overwhelmed by a superior force of two battle-hardened IJA divisions. What defines the battle of Hong Kong was not the scale - just 14,000 defended the colony - but the intensity of this battle, fought not only by the British Army, Royal Navy and Royal Air Force but also Canadians, Hong Kong's own defence force, the Indian Army and many civilians. The

campaign itself is characterized by a fierce land battle and fast, furious but hopeless naval actions.

Lieutenant Laurence Kilbee, HKNVF, commanded 3 different MTBs, over this short period and was in the thick of the naval battles. When Hong Kong surrendered he became a prisoner of war for almost four years, and early during his time as a POW, when the memories were fresh, he recorded the last days before Hong Kong surrendered. Here are a few extracts of his memoirs:

11 December A day of non-stop activity. All available craft ordered to Kowloon Bay to evacuate troops from the mainland. The bay was a fantastic sight, full of every conceivable craft. At 1900 we were ordered to Stonecutters Island which had been under continuous bombardment for 24 hours to embark wounded. At 2100 we were ordered to sink HMS TAMAR (a 3,600-ton ex-troopship which had been anchored off the naval base since 1867.) In the event the torpedo failed to find its mark and Tamar was later scuttled with explosive charges.

12 December We took a beating with continuous high level bombing. The 2nd Flotilla was ordered to attack and expend all ammunition shooting up everything in sight. Unbeknown to us, the Japanese had already established a beach head on the island west of Sugar Refinery at North Point. We were ordered to attack advancing forces along the shore. Guns to the left, guns to the right, guns in front and canon from above. On they sped into the fiery jaws of the oriental dragon itself.

This was the marine equivalent of the charge of the Light Brigade. Lieutenant Ronnie Ashby led the flotilla in MTB 07 pressing home the attack under withering fire from land, sea and air and suffering heavy losses in the process. (Editorial note: MTB 07 was hit 97 times, lost two of her crew, all three engines were put out of action and the boat had to be towed out of harms way). Only 3 MTB's survived to limp back to base in Aberdeen. The attack was arguably the most daring daylight MTB attack of the war and was referred as “The Balaclava of the Sea”. (Editorial note: Ashby was awarded the DSC).



MTB 08 off Hong Kong Island in 1939



*MTB 07 – Into The Fiery Jaws – Artist's Impression
(Nobody had a camera at the time)*

16th December Worst day of the battle – the biggest raid on Aberdeen, large formations of planes. The target was HMS THRACIAN, an elderly destroyer and the largest RN warship on station. The damage to the docks was also extensive. I was ashore and raced back to MTB 08 but she was well on fire and later written off. THRACIAN was so badly damaged that she had to be beached.

19th December The surviving MTBs ordered to attack enemy landing craft in the North Point area. MTB 07 and 09 attacked

first and sank one landing craft and inflicted heavy casualties in other craft. MTB 11 and 12 followed and 12 lost both the CO and First Lieutenant.

These diary notes give just a flavour of the actions and chaos during the final days before surrender. It is believed 26 was also lost with all hands but the exact circumstances of her demise have never come to light. She was last seen heading erratically and apparently hit one of the breakwaters. Four of the boats were scuttled to avoid the falling into enemy hands. Nearly all the survivors of the flotilla were taken prisoner and were to suffer terrible hardship and deprivation over the next three and a half years but one officer and a few ratings managed to escape into mainland China and made a long and tortuous journey overland all the way to Rangoon. They had the assistance of Chinese guerrilla forces who led them safely through Japanese occupied territory. The 3000 mile trek took the party 51 days. They arrived in Rangoon the day Singapore surrendered. Rangoon followed three weeks later but by this time most of the escapees had managed to escape by sea and to relative safety. One question remains, the answer to which has been lost to history, is why this small band were accompanied by a small, one legged Chinese Admiral, Chen Chek. This story would make a great film!

THE CHANNEL DASH

In February 1942 the Germans sailed three capital ships from Brest up the English Channel, through the Straits of Dover to the safety of German ports. The ships were the battleships *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau* and the heavy cruiser *Prinz Eugen* and they came through the Straits in daylight unscathed (although two would be slightly damaged by mines before reaching port). Admittedly, they had for the latter part of the transit a heavy escort of destroyers and E-Boats and extensive air cover; the British had only managed to deploy a fraction of the air and sea forces which had been earmarked to counter this very scenario.

The three ships had been refitted, repaired and stored in Brest. The initial German High Command plan was to send them out as a very powerful fighting force into the North Atlantic to cause havoc and destruction to the convoys. Hitler had, for somewhat obscure reasons, decided that Norway would be invaded by the Allies and wanted maximum naval assets ready to thwart this. For 11 months prior to the breakout from Brest, RAF Bomber and Coastal Commands had mounted heavy bombing raids on the ships, the dockyard and infrastructure around Brest. There had been some 3,000 sorties and 4,000 tons of explosive dropped, but the ships largely remained operational, sustaining no serious damage. The plan to

sail the ships through the Channel, codenamed Operation Cerberus, commenced on the evening of 11 February when the ships left Brest under cover of darkness. Reports from French Resistance confirmed the ships had sailed but Intelligence in London did not initially envisage the Dover Straits option (The Germans had taken onboard tropical uniforms and stores just prior to sailing and this was reported to London) For a vital 12 hours the ships were allowed to sail north east undetected and unmolested, although 32 MTBs at Ramsgate and Dover were on alert together with RAF Bomber Command (approximately 100 bombers), 16 fighter squadrons and a squadron of elderly, biplane Swordfish torpedo bombers.

We now take up the Coastal Forces story – in essence, minimal MTBs sent out in marginal operating sea-state conditions to mount torpedo attacks against three capital ships in the face of fierce E-Boat and destroyer escort resistance and unremitting air attack (There were approximately 60 German escorting warships and some 300 aircraft). At 1150 on the 12th of February 1942, Lt Cdr Nigel Pumphrey (SO of the 6th MTB Flotilla) in MTB 221, led 219 (Sub Lt Arnold-Forster), 48 (Lt Law from Canada), 45 (Sub Lt Gamble) and 44 (Sub Lt Saunders from Australia) left Dover. Pumphrey's



Height of Battle – Painting by Reg Mitchell, with thanks to The Channel Dash Memorial Trust whose Chairman, Peter Nixon, presented this painting to The Coastal Forces Heritage Trust in February 2012, the 70th Anniversary of The Channel Dash

tiny force of five MTBs was supported by two gunboats also from Dover, plus a hopefully the Fleet Air Arm's 825 Squadron of 6 Swordfish torpedo aircraft flying out from Manston and a cover escort of three RAF squadrons of fighters. Three MTBs would also sail later from Ramsgate. In rough but just operational conditions, the Dover boats sped East by South only to find the enemy had already passed through the Straits. Almost at once they came under attack from the air, so they steadied to try and seek a way through the escort screens - now in sight to starboard and engaging them fiercely. Fire was returned as they waited for their fighter escort to appear and draw some of the enemy's attention. But, just as the SO realised he would not have enough speed to get inside the outer E-Boat screen, let alone pierce that of the destroyers, his engines failed.

The boats had to split up and he gave the order to attack independently, hoping that the gunboats would appear soon to create a much-needed diversion, whilst his own boats sought firing positions for their torpedoes. More German fighters now arrived to add to their problems and hits from E-Boat fire and from above were being registered in all boats. Nevertheless, 221 managed to get into position and fired torpedoes at *Scharnhorst* at a range of about 4000 yards. Ahead, 219 and 48, in spite of equally close attention from E-Boats and fighters, managed to wriggle their way into long

range firing positions but no hits were observed. Meanwhile Gamble in 45 was living up to his name. He decided to see if he could break through the middle of the E-Boat screen. Peppered with shells, he steadied to fire his torpedoes at Prinz Eugen only to see them misfire and sink. As he turned away a destroyer escort chase and Gamble was relieved to see the two gunboats arrive and make smoke between him and the destroyers allowing him to escape in the nick of time.

These two MGBs (Lt Gould in command) were also able to help 44's withdrawal. She too had suffered engine trouble but, after dealing with the defect, moved in astern of the E-Boat screen in order to get in another shot at Prinz Eugen, this time a little closer at 3000 yards. Observing no hit, Saunders dropped astern of the battle as the Swordfish arrived to the crescendo of a heavy barrage from the heavy ships. He judged the aircrew would need assistance "when, not if" they were shot down. Meanwhile three Ramsgate MTBs, led by Lt Long in 32, had sailed some 30 minutes after the Dover boats and rapidly became entangled with enemy destroyers and E-Boats. Long judged these to be part of the port bow escort, but in fact he had passed astern of the major targets and it was now too late to catch up.

So ended a gallant but vain attempt to disrupt the enemy's audacious plan. In addition to a DSO for Pumphrey, two

DSCs, a DSM and five Mentions in Dispatches were awarded amongst the crews of the boats involved.

The story of the heroic attack by the six 90-knot Swordfish of 825 Squadron does not belong here, but suffice to say that, as Reg Mitchell's fine painting shows, in what must have been one of the most uneven air battles of all time, of the eighteen airmen who faced those impossible odds, only five returned alive – all rescued from the sea. Their leader, Lieutenant Commander Eugene Esmonde, who the very day before had been at Buckingham Palace receiving the DSO for his contribution to the Bismark sinking, was awarded a posthumous VC.

There is no doubt that Operation Fuller, the codename given to the Combined Air and Sea operation to thwart the German capital ships return to German waters and to sink them, was one of the greatest tactical failures of the war. A British destroyer had been severely damaged and 42 aircraft had been lost in 398 RAF fighter, 242 bomber and 35 Coastal Command sorties. In fact, British losses were relatively small. The real failure was one of lost opportunities to defeat a large proportion of the German Navy at sea. Whilst it must be acknowledged the Germans had a fair slice of luck, for example visibility was reduced at the critical time when the ships were approaching the Straits and there was a long catalogue of technical problems in both sea and air assets which came together at exactly the wrong time. But there is little doubt

that the bold enemy decision to tackle the Dover Straits in daylight became the key factor in their triumph.

British public opinion was appalled and British prestige suffered at home and abroad. A leading article in *The Times* read,

Vice Admiral Ciliax (German Flag Officer with Operational Command) has succeeded where the Duke of Medina Sidonia failed. Nothing more mortifying to the pride of our sea-power has happened since the seventeenth century. It spelled the end of the Royal Navy legend that in wartime no enemy battle fleet could pass through what we proudly call the English Channel. THE TIMES (14 FEBRUARY 1942)

Winston Churchill posed the pertinent question – “Why”? There were, of course, a wide range of reasons and factors and these would come out at the various enquiries but, at the end of the day, undoubtedly inter-service co-operation and, in particular sharing of intelligence and joint planning all advanced hugely and, in due course, lessons would be interwoven into the D-Day planning. The Germans themselves did not consider this episode of the war as a strategic victory; they felt that had these three ships been able to sally forth into the North Atlantic, as originally planned, they could have caused massive disruption to the convoys, possibly changing the whole tide of the war.

APRIL 1943, THE BATTLE FOR TUNISIA – “THE MOST DARING RAID OF ALL TIME?”

As the battle for Tunisia was nearing its final phase in April 1943, the Commander-in-Chief of the British Naval Forces in the Mediterranean, Admiral Cunningham, ordered units of the 32nd Flotilla, which were operating out of the forward base at Sousse on the Tunis coast with “Dog” boats to “carry out a slow inshore patrol of the Cape Bon peninsula in broad daylight” to bring back essential information for Allied Powers to ascertain whether Rommel was planning a last desperate Dunkirk type operation to get the Afrika Korps out of North Africa. The 32nd Flotilla was commanded by a battle-hardened, pugnacious and able 25-year-old, Lieutenant Stuart Gould (He had already been awarded the DSC twice and taken part in the Channel Dash actions). It was assumed, rightly as it turned out, that the German forces were unfamiliar with the Dog boats and they could be mistaken for E-Boats. German swastika flags were hastily made for three boats, 639 (with the senior officer, Gould, embarked), 633 and 637. As well as gathering vital intelligence, the small force was given the directive to “clear the sea lanes”, causing as much mayhem

and confusion as possible. It was a mission ideally matched to Gould's aggressive spirit.

The story is taken up by a reporter working for the United Press, George Palmer, who had spent 15 months covering the Malta convoys, commando raids on Tobruk, naval actions against the Italian Fleet and had himself been torpedoed.

The three tiny ships slipped out of harbour at sunset and arrived off the German shore line at daybreak. Just half a mile away, the lookout saw a powerful coastal battery but the Germans on the beach only waved. The boats cruised slowly on, charting exact positions of all camouflaged gun emplacements and enemy forces. Still the Nazis waved from the beaches. They reached Kelibia Pier from which the Axis were expected to concentrate the evacuation. Soldiers, not more than a few hundred feet away, continued to work on the pier. The MTB observers recorded everything. Around the point, the MTBs arrived at the principal German anchorage and Gould and his officers recorded positions of gun emplacements, radars, storage depots, ammunition dumps and troop concentrations



Artist's (dramatic) impression of a Dog Boat in action

Amazingly and inexplicitly, the Germans still failed to recognise the true identity of the boats. Repeatedly German fighter aircraft passed low overhead, but there was a general disbelief that any such insignificant enemy vessels would dare to come right into such heavily defended harbours in broad daylight.

After an hour and a half, Gould and his team had gleaned all possible intelligence information. Two Italian minesweepers and a convoy escort ship were spotted. Gould ordered his boats into action. The swastikas came down and battle ensigns hoisted. At 300 yards and for 20 minutes the MTBs raked the enemy with two-pounders, pom-poms and machine guns.

The shells which missed the enemy ships went into a factory directly behind. Total surprise was achieved. The Italian crews were too shocked to man their guns and return fire; many jumped overboard. Both sweepers were sunk and the support vessel was ablaze, bow to stern. Gould's boats reversed course, shooting at anything which looked interesting. (In fact, later historical records suggest that 5 ships – two minesweepers, two important supply ships and an R-boat – were destroyed.) A large number of German transport aircraft were also destroyed on an adjacent landing strip and several aircraft were shot out of the skies.

The German command thought that they were being attacked by a large scale force and ordered troops to defensive positions and scrambled all available fighter aircraft but in most cases it was too late.

Almost out of ammunition, but with vital intelligence and leaving a trail of destruction behind him, Gould could have withdrawn at speed and with great honour, but a sizeable

merchant ship and two destroyers were spotted at mile off-shore. Gould launched one of the most brazen attacks in naval history. MTB 639 with Gould onboard had already expended its torpedoes and therefore headed for the destroyers to draw their fire whilst the other two boats manoeuvred into position to attack with torpedoes. Hits were observed and it seems likely that the merchant ship was destroyed. However, the MTBs were now taking serious fire both from the destroyer escorts and waves of fighter aircraft. 639 took the brunt. The CO, Lieutenant G L Russell, was killed and Gould seriously wounded. 639 was sinking. 633 and 637 came alongside to take off survivors, a tricky and dangerous operation whilst all boats were under fierce attack. The rescue was achieved but Gould died of his wounds shortly after. 637 and 633 were able to get back to Souse and deliver the vital intelligence. In spite of the losses, both in terms of casualties and a boat, it had been an extraordinarily successful and daring operation.

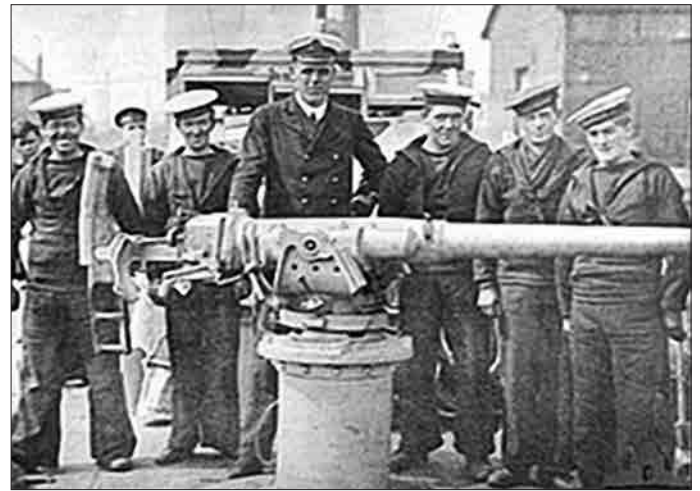
The one enduring question, which will now never be satisfactorily answered, is why Stuart Gould was not awarded a posthumous VC but in the fog of war and, of course, with the senior officer dead, it took time for the details of the actions to emerge. At that time only the VC and a mention in despatches could be awarded posthumously (Gould was awarded a M-in-D) but, in piecing together the accounts of survivors, the renowned writer Len Reynolds in his book *Dog Boats at War* is clear that this was one of the most daring and successful actions of the Coastal Forces war in the Mediterranean.

THE QUICK-FIRE 1886 3-POUNDER HOTCHKISS GUN

In recent newsletters, we have featured some of the more unusual (and usually ineffective and unsuccessful) weapons which, by one way or other, found their way into Coastal Forces vessels. The 3-Pdr Hotchkiss gun was certainly the oldest but it was also an extremely reliable and robust weapon. The gun first entered service in 1886 so was already over 50 years old at the start of the Second World War.

The Hotchkiss armament company based in St Etienne in France was founded by Benjamin Hotchkiss, an emigrant American. The firm later went into partnership with the British Armstrong Armoury and the 3-pounder Hotchkiss gun was mass produced for both major and minor warships in the First World War. The guns were manufactured in large numbers in UK at the Elswick Ordnance Company in partnership with Armstrongs and, in fact, during its long production history the gun was exported to a total of 27 countries.

The Hotchkiss 3-pounder was first deployed in World War One as a close-range weapon to counter attack by small, fast torpedo boats and submarines on the surface (of course). In battleships and cruisers they were mounted high up in the

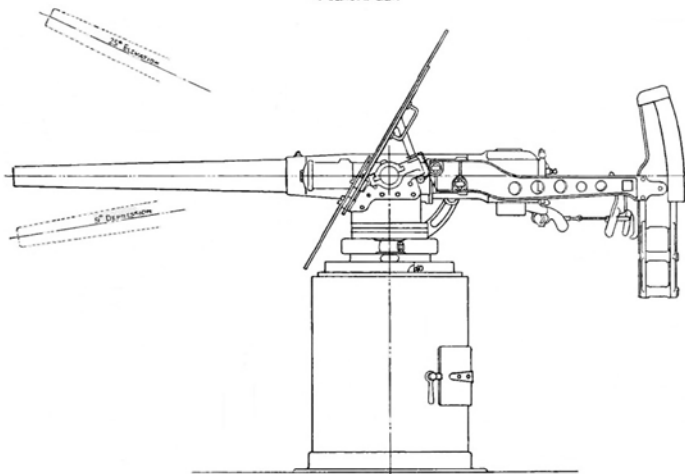


superstructure and could depress 35 degrees to meet very close-range targets. The gun had a bore of 1.9 inch (47 mm), a range of 2.8 miles, could fire at 25 rounds per minute and was aimed by simple telescopic sighting. Some 550 guns were put into storage between the wars in Britain.

In 1939 there was an urgent need to arm large numbers of merchant ships, auxiliaries, trawlers and the Fairmile 'A' and 'B' motor launches and the 72-foot harbour defence launches. The Hotchkiss guns were quickly brought out of storage. They were particularly suitable for minor war vessels and merchant ships because they were light, easy to fit and maintain and to operate but robust enough to be unaffected by salt and wind. Some of these weapons were modified to elevate to 47 degrees for defence against aircraft (the Mark V version). (However, with such basic aiming, the chance of actually bringing an aircraft down must have been negligible.) There is, however, little doubt that the Hotchkiss gun provided a morale boost to small, vulnerable vessels as a way of "fighting back" when under intense air attack, for example. Certainly, the Hotchkiss was used by a number of Fairmile A motor launches against E Boats off the East Coast and in the Dover Straits but it has not been possible to ascertain how accurate and effective the gun was. (The motor launches which took part in the St Nazaire and the Dieppe Raids had been re-armed with the smaller calibre 20 mm Oerlikon with its much faster rate of fire) The Hotchkiss 3-pounder was finally withdrawn as a weapon in 1948 but it continued in service as an ideal saluting gun and was to be found in some shore establishments such as HMS DOLPHIN at Gosport right up to the 1970s.

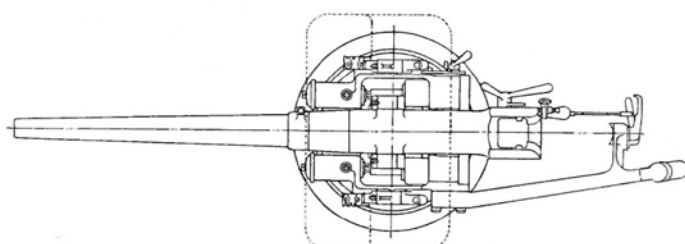
47 M/M 3 PR. QUICK FIRING GUN ON ELSWICK PEDESTAL RECOIL MOUNTING.

ELEVATION
40 Calibre Gun



47 M/M 3 PR. QUICK FIRING GUN ON ELSWICK PEDESTAL RECOIL MOUNTING

PLAN
40 Calibre Gun



MEDUSA “MYSTERY” OBJECTS ANSWERS

- Figure 1: Type 134 ASDIC display in the chartroom.
- Figure 2: Decca Mk IV display from 1960 in the chartroom.
- Figure 3: Twin Vickers K machine guns, in weapons rack in the chartroom, operationally on the bridge wing.
- Figure 4: Lee Enfield .303 rifles. In the chartroom.
- Figure 5: Top of the ensign staff.
- Figure 6: Type 286 radar display, W/T office.
- Figure 7: Display for the Gee navigation equipment, W/T office.
- Figure 8: Admiralty pattern Morse key, W/T office.
- Figure 9: Pussers right angle torch (a rare one that works) in the wardroom.
- Figure 10: 24V overhead light switches in the wardroom.
- Figure 11: Plummer block supporting the steering shaft, engine room.
- Figure 12: Outfit QM (One of the two Decca prototype units built specially for D-Day).

IN MEMORIAM

WE SAY FAREWELL TO:

John Ascoli	3299
Albert (Tex) Baseley	
Bernard (Ben) Beilby	249
Mrs Margaret Bentley (nee Matthews)	1093
Ernest Bown	3162
Keith Butler	
C G Cheeseman	3276
Eric Miles	2610
Peter Rawlins	3448
C R Stableford	
William (Bill) Turner	
Douglas Wilkinson	2511

WE WILL REMEMBER THEM



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