



THE COASTAL FORCES HERITAGE TRUST

Now affiliated to



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NEWSLETTER



FROM THE EDITOR

Without wishing to “steal the Chairman’s thunder”, I have to tell our readership and supporters that this is to be the last newsletter; you will have realised that the prime reason for this is that the Trust is about to realise its core objective which is the establishment of the Coastal Forces Museum. (In addition, the need to save on paper and cut postage costs have been unavoidable factors too). The Chairman will tell you more in his message and will say how the Trust will work to establishing a faster and more efficient flow of information and news using the Internet.

I want to make this newsletter ‘special’ and encompass as much of Coastal Forces history as I can. Inevitably, most of this relates to wartime, mostly to the Second World War. I recount some of the extraordinary achievements (and one or two gallant failures) of Coastal Forces and, hopefully, provide some insight into the lives of those who served. I have tried to find first-hand, contemporary sources and move away from the formal reports and historical records. I hope to glimpse the reality of going into action, the heady mix of adrenaline and fear, but also touch on the boredom of endless patrols and uneventful long watches, and the sheer exhaustion of it all. I want to show life in a small, cramped, vulnerable warship, the ups and downs (literally and metaphorically) of life onboard in often relentless foul weather. I also want to pay tribute to the comradeship and courage, determination and devotion of those young men who went to war, many in their teens, many leaving safe civilian jobs ashore.

There are some photographs (But these were sometimes staged for PR purposes; taking a camera to sea was not permitted and, anyway, nobody thought of taking photographs in the middle of a night action.) The drawings and paintings give, perhaps, give a better insight into life in Coastal Forces. The drawings were done by a war artist, C E Turner, and were all drawn on location from personal observation and printed in the *Illustrated London News*.

The result is a rather lengthy anthology (pages 4 to 26). By the end of the Second World War there had been over 1,000 actions and 500 enemy vessels sunk. It has, of course,

been difficult to decide what to include, even more difficult what to leave out, inevitably much of what is here has been covered of over the last 14 years of newsletters.

Sadly there was not enough space to pay tribute to all the Commonwealth and Allied Navies who joined forces with the RN at time of greatest need and gave outstanding service. Likewise, it has not been possible to include the amazing support in the various bases around this country and in other theatres. The engineering, armament, stores and logistic support and also the complex command and administrative organisations were all vital in getting the boats out to sea and combat ready. Boats would return with battle damage and the base support staff would work under huge pressures to meet the challenge of getting the boats repaired and seaworthy again. Spare parts and stores were always a huge problem. The WRNS personnel were magnificent; many had to learn new trades and skills, such as armament maintenance and driving tractors, in a very short time.

To this anthology I add an account of life at sea by two junior officers who have been training in ships of today’s Coastal Forces Squadron; these reflect the impressive calibre of our young trainee officers and show that going to sea in small warships, often in very unpleasant conditions, is just the same as it was for their predecessors 80 years ago.

In addition, this newsletter carries two important tributes. In the last newsletter we announced the sad news of the death of John Ascoli. He was a stalwart trustee who went on to become the Chairman of Trustees for many years. He was totally dedicated to Coastal Forces and the Trust and was an inspirational strategic planner. We have also lost Geoffrey Hudson, another trustee, who was probably the most widely respected historian and authority on Coastal Forces vessels. His expertise and encyclopaedic knowledge were unique; over the years he handled literally hundreds of queries and requests for help.

Commander Rupert Head, RN, Editor

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CHAIRMAN'S LETTER

From its inception in 1994 the objective of the Trust has always been the education of the public in the history of Coastal Forces by the restoration and permanent display of Coastal Forces craft, together with the artefacts, records and memorabilia relating to two World Wars. I am now delighted to announce that the museum will open in the autumn and that the Trust will therefore have realised its core objective. This is a significant milestone, the culmination of about ten years of planning, fund-raising, lobbying and publicity. I want to take this opportunity to thank all our loyal and generous supporters who have continued to back the Trust over long periods of uncertainty and often with little obvious progress. I also want to thank and pay tribute to our principal partners, the Portsmouth Naval Base Property Trust and the National Museum of the Royal Navy.

After a month of intense deliberations and negotiation with our partners, principally the National Museum of the Royal Navy, we have concluded a fitting name for our Museum which will be:

'The Night Hunters: The Royal Navy's Coastal Forces at War'

And the gallery will be named:

'The Robert Hitchens Memorial Exhibition'

(Lieutenant Commander Robert Hitchens, DSO*, DSC**, RNVR being, of course, one of our most renowned and decorated officers of World War Two)

We are confident that the new museum will be a winner. Of course, we have a cracking good story to tell and we have been working hard with the NMRN and a highly successful firm of enterprise consultants in this field to produce a visitor venue which will be exciting and memorable. In particular, there will be a large screen audio visual display to recreate, vividly, the action, drama and adrenalin of an MTB night attack on a convoy. There will be lots else, of course, and plenty of "hands-on" exhibits for visitors all ages; we want to engender enough interest and enjoyment so that visitors will want to come back and will pass positive recommendations to family and friends. Visitors to the

Portsmouth Historic Dockyard will be encouraged to come across the harbour by ferry (free for Naval Historic Attractions ticket holders) to visit our museum, Explosion! (Museum of Naval Ordnance) and the Submarine Museum.

Against this background, we feel it is the right time to stop the newsletters. For the past 14 years, they have served their purpose well and have enabled the Trust to keep in touch with our supporters and, in particular, the veterans, all part of keeping the Coastal Forces 'family' alive. However, we appreciate that the newsletter has always had its limitations; for a start there are only two editions every year. We recognise that there is need to communicate with you all more frequently and pass on news quickly and as it happens. For example, the formal opening of the museum next year will be a major event and we will need to find out which of our veterans would be able and want to attend. Our intention is to greatly enhance the website and, as time goes on, this will hopefully reach a greater and greater audience. There will be opportunity for feedback, recounting personal stories, reactions to the new museum and suggestions to improve it. We want to engender two-way flow of information, ideas and comment. The website will remain www.coastal-forces.org.uk

I am delighted to congratulate our Trustee Alan Watson on the award of the OBE. This was announced in the New Years Honours List and is a totally deserved recognition to his many years of dedicated hard work in preserving our Naval heritage and history. The award also, of course, recognises his inspirational leadership in preserving and running Medusa. Alan continues to give the Trust his total dedication and commitment; we are all welcome this splendid news.

Finally, this is my last opportunity to wish you, on paper, my very best wishes for the future. The last fifteen months have been extraordinary, the like of which none of us ever want to see again. But to end on a positive note, I am confident that we are on the brink of an exciting new beginning and that the Coastal Forces Museum will be a fitting tribute to all who served in both wars in Coastal Forces and will preserve their stories for future generations.

Vice Admiral Sir Paul Haddacks, KCB

MEN, BULLETS AND BATTLES – A (VERY SELECTIVE) ANTHOLOGY OF COASTAL FORCES AT WAR

HOW DID IT ALL BEGIN?

First, a few words about the origins of Coastal Forces. In 1915 three junior officers of the Harwich Destroyer Force went to the Admiralty with the proposition that small, fast motorboats armed with torpedoes could transit minefields and attack



A CMB at speed on trials

German warships at anchor in their bases. Mindful perhaps that motorboats were infinitely less costly both in manpower and procurement than major new warships, the Admiralty gave tentative approval and produced a Staff Requirement for 12 Coastal Motorboats (CMBs) to be built by the John Thornycroft boat building yard at Woolston, Southampton.

Thornycroft came up with a design for 40-foot boats with revolutionary stepped hulls which allowed the boats to plane (in calm waters) and reach an impressive speed of 35 knots. The boats were powered by lightweight, petrol aircraft engines and armed with an 18-inch torpedo (or depth charges/mines). The torpedo was housed in a trough aft; to launch the torpedo it was forcibly ejected by a small explosive charge, tail end first, from the stern, the torpedo's motor fired up on hitting the water and would then hopefully travel at speed towards the target; at the same time the CMB had to quickly swerve out of the way to avoid being hit by its own torpedo. The weight of a fully loaded boat, complete with torpedo, was to not exceed 4.5 tons, the capacity of the davits of a light cruiser.



Painting of ML49 by Frank Mason, an excellent and accurate war artist

These boats collectively formed the Royal Navy's first offensive arm of small attack craft, a new branch which came to be called Light Coastal Forces (the 'Light' was later dropped); in the Fleet they were nicknamed the Suicide Club! In December 1916 the 3rd CMB Division was operationally deployed, with a support ship, to the Belgian coast under command of Lieutenant W N T Beckett. The first recorded action was on 7 April 1917 when several CMB's attacked a group of German destroyers anchored off Dunkirk; one destroyer was sunk and one very seriously damaged.

At around the same time as the first CMBs were ordered, the US Elco Company of New York started to build for the RN 80-foot motor launches. They were shipped across the Atlantic in large numbers. Their prime purpose was to help protect harbours and coastlines from submarine incursions. In fact, they were employed on a wide variety of coastal duties. They were lightly armed with a 13- or 3-pounder gun, were relatively slow and very vulnerable to incoming fire. Now rather forgotten, the ML's lacked the glamour, speed and dash of the CMBs but they provided valuable service and the RN eventually acquired a total of 580. Their chief claim to fame was for their part in the Zeebrugge attack. Although not widely remembered today, the first Coastal Forces VC was awarded to the commanding officer of an ML, Lieutenant Percy Dean. His VC is now in the Ashcroft Collection.

**LIEUTENANT PERCY THOMPSON DEAN,
VC, RNVR, ML 282**
For most conspicuous gallantry

Lieutenant Dean handled his boat in a most magnificent and heroic manner when embarking the officers and men from the blockships at Zeebrugge. He followed the blockships in and closed "Intrepid" and "Iphigenia" under a constant and deadly fire from machine and heavy guns at point blank range, embarking over 100 officers and men. This completed, he was proceeding out of the canal, when he heard that an officer was in the water. He returned, rescued him, and then proceeded, handling his boat throughout as calmly as if engaged in a practice manoeuvre. Three men were shot down at his side whilst he coned his ship. On clearing the entrance to the canal the steering gear broke down. He manoeuvred his boat by the engines and avoided complete destruction by steering so close in under the mole that the guns in the batteries could not depress sufficiently to fire on the boat. The whole of this operation was carried out under a constant machine-gun fire at a few yards range. It was solely due to this officer's courage and daring that ML282 succeeded in saving so many valuable lives.

1919 AND THE RUSSIAN CIVIL WAR

The potential of the CMB against capital ships was dramatically demonstrated when in 1919 the Royal Navy found itself embroiled in the Russian Civil War, fighting on the side of the White Russians against the Bolsheviks. A significant naval force had been deployed to the Gulf of Finland to counter the Soviet Baltic Fleet which was based there and to help secure the independence of the Baltic states. Also, secretly from the rest of the Fleet, two CMB's were sent out under the command of Lieutenant Augustus Agar to support a wide network of clandestine intelligence gathering operations. But it was his extraordinary audacious attack in a single CMB on the Bolshevik cruiser *Oleg* off Kronstadt in 1919 which was to become legendary (and has been recounted in detail in previous newsletters).

The Oxford Dictionary of National Biographies says that Agar "epitomized the 'sea dog' of British naval tradition: honourable, extremely brave and totally dedicated to King, country and the Royal Navy." But it is Agar's own words which give first-hand insight into the ferocity of the engagement:

..... Slipped through the line of destroyers and between a torpedo boat and another destroyer, turned north and attacked the Oleg at anchor. Fired at about 800 yards and turned to starboard at

full speed and started to get out of it. Torpedo hit her just abaft the foremost funnel, a great cloud of water much higher than the funnel and some black smoke, she seemed at once to settle by the head. Everybody then opened fire on me. We were going at full speed and shots falling all around us, two big shells missed our stern by 5 to 10 yards. Spray and seas coming over drenching us to the skin but we were merry and bright and gave three cheers though we could hardly hear each other!!back at 3.30 am and felt like dropping down – What a life!

After this sinking of the *Oleg* Agar's success was followed up with a second attack by a hastily assembled flotilla of 40- and 55-foot CMBs towed out from England. This attack, joint with the newly formed RAF, was ordered by Admiral Walter Cowan, Commander of the Baltic Force, against the Russian Bolshevik Fleet's capital ships inside the "safe" anchorage under the fortress of Kronstadt; Agar led the RN boats to the anchorage under heavy fire. The flotilla was commanded by Commander Claude Dobson, DSO in CMB 31. He directed the attack and his boat torpedoed the 17,400 ton pre-dreadnought battleship *Andrei Pervozvanny*. The CO of CMB 88, Lieutenant Archibald Dayrell-Reed, in CMB 88 was shot in the head and his boat thrown off course. Second in command Lieutenant Gordon Steele moved Dayrell-Reed out of the way,

grabbed the wheel and took control of the erratically swerving boat. He torpedoed the *Andrei Pervozvanny* also and then manoeuvred to get a clear shot at the 23,360 ton dreadnought *Petropavlovsk* and managed to fire a second torpedo into the battleship, turn away in a very tight space, firing his machine guns as his boat exited the harbour under heavy fire. Both Dobson and Steele were awarded the VC and Agar the DSO. As a result of this attack the Russian Baltic Fleet never ventured out to sea again.

Admiral Sir Charles Madden, Commander-in-Chief of the Grand Fleet, wrote:

This successful enterprise will rank among the most daring and skilfully executed of Naval Operations of this war. On no other occasions during hostilities has so small a force inflicted so much damage on the enemy.

Note: As many readers will know, Agar's boat, CMB 4, is preserved and displayed in the Portsmouth Historic Dockyard. A faithful, sea-going replica is being built and an update on progress is on pages 30 and 31.

WORLD WAR TWO – THE EARLY DAYS

Coastal Forces were woefully under strength and ill prepared at the beginning of the war. In the mid 1930's the Admiralty had, after much procrastination, ordered a total of 18 MTBs from the British Power Boat Company. But these boats had very light gun armament and the same somewhat arcane torpedo launch system used by CMB's in WWI. They were never going to be a match for

the larger, sturdier, and certainly better armed E-Boats with their reliable diesel engines and excellent sea keeping qualities. The Germans had 33 E-Boats in 1939. They stuck to this successful design but were continually making improvements; the E-boats got progressively bigger and more capable.

In the early days there were several senior officers who did not recognise any role for fast, fighting craft. One admiral is on



Early British Power Boats MGB's 77&75

record as saying “What the hell are these motor boat flotillas being formed for?” (A year later the senior officers were calling of more flotillas and a greatly enhanced boat building capacity)

For the first 6 or so months of the war, there were few naval engagements; both sides consolidated, trained and prepared. The Reservists and ‘Hostilities Only’ ratings signed up in large numbers.



A First Generation E-Boat

DUNKIRK – DEFEAT OR DELIVERANCE

Editorial Note: The Dunkirk story is well known but it is rare to have access to a first-hand account by a Coastal Forces commanding officer who was, over a period of 8 days, totally immersed in this extraordinary evacuation, and who experienced the war on the beaches and hazardous Channel crossings by a mass armada of vessels. We are grateful to William Dreyer, the son of Commander Christopher Dreyer, DSO, DSC, RN who, as a 21 year old sub lieutenant, commanded the famed MTB 102. William Dreyer has provided a wealth of his father’s memoirs, including Dunkirk. Here, necessarily abridged, is Christopher Dreyer’s memories of Dunkirk, mostly written in the immediate aftermath:*

I joined MTB’s as a sub-lieutenant in January 1940. It had been my ambition to get into them ever since I was a midshipman and saw the first boats operating in 1937-8 in the Mediterranean, and realised that it was possible to have one’s own exciting command so young. I was also convinced that these little warships had really important possibilities, and I desperately wanted to be involved with them. I got my wish and was appointed to HMS VERNON additional for HMS HORNET for MTB service. At that time HMS HORNET was still being built, and the boats and their administration were based at the main torpedo school in Portsmouth, HMS VERNON

Throughout January and February 1940 there was not much to do, the war was static and far away. I went to sea when I could in any boat available; we talked and looked at drawings and discussed tactics; and I did a little training with the RNVR officers, who had been appointed as future First Lieutenants and CO’s of boats; but no real training system existed yet and there was no history to work from - the CMB’s of the First World War had been paid off in 1922 and their experience was lost to us.

Early in March I was given command of MTB 102. We commissioned at our new base, HMS HORNET. And so began for me at the age of 21 one of the very happiest periods of my life in the Navy. I had to get to know the boat in every detail and her crew, and to learn to handle her till I could confidently take her anywhere where she could fit, in any

conditions of wind and current. I had spent a good deal of my midshipman’s time running ships boats and was very used to handling them; I had spent much of my childhood with small boats on the River Torridge in North Devon, so I was also used to working in fast running currents; but, of course, 102 was a good deal bigger and very much more powerful than the ship’s boats and dinghies that I knew. I had to learn her ways, and it was a pleasure. She had three screws, but one normally manoeuvred only with the two wing shafts, using the Ford V8 auxiliary engines. On this basis she was really very simple to handle and I quickly got confidence in her. I was also extremely lucky to have such a wonderful crew to start off my time in MTB’s. They had almost all been with the boat since she commissioned in 1937, and I suppose that they had become slightly forgotten about and lost by the authorities, and gradually they had all been promoted to a rank senior to the one that their job required.

By May it was very clear that all was not a bit well in France. It seemed that our Expeditionary Force was separated from the French by a German breakthrough to the Channel Ports, and all sorts of gloomy reports and forecasts were coming through. Belgium had fallen, following the occupation of Holland. After one of our training exercises, a running sailor appeared to say that I was urgently wanted on the telephone by the Captain of HORNET. Captain Maurice was his usual imperturbable self. He said simply, “There seems to be some sort of bother going on with the army at a place called Dunkirk. You are to go to Dover tonight and report to the Flag Officer there for further orders. Go along now to the C-in-C’s offices and tell the Staff Officer Operations from me that you require official sailing orders”. This was real drama. I went back to the boat and told the crew we would be sailing eastwards tonight on a real war footing. I remembered that we ought to have some demolition charges, because we didn’t carry depth charges like the new boats. However, we managed to “borrow” a quadruple Vickers ‘K’ 0.303 inch machine gun mounting from VERNON.

After arriving at Dover and seeing the Admiral, Sir Bertram Ramsay, for a brief kindly welcome and God-speed message,



MTB 102 in 1939

I was told to nip over to Dunkirk and report to the Naval Officer in charge there, Captain William Tennant, and see what I could do to help. I hurried back down to the boat and we sailed right away.

Even at that fairly early stage it wasn't at all difficult to navigate to Dunkirk, since there was an immense cloud of black smoke billowing out from the bombed oil storage depot beside the harbour there, so that all one had to do was steer for the base of this cloud pillar. I think that the huge pall of smoke, with flames at its base, will never be forgotten by anyone who saw it. It was dreadfully ominous and awe-inspiring, and seemed to spell out the doom of the city and of France.

I suppose that by the 27th or 28th May the marvelous pilgrimage of all the hordes of yachts, motorboats, small steamships, fishing boats and the whole variety of ill-assorted transports, which were assembling to collect the remnants of our Expeditionary Force from the harbour and the beaches had just begun to flow. Certainly we passed quite a few very odd looking craft.

We arrived in Dunkirk about noon and berthed on the long main jetty, and I walked into the docks. Everything was in a dreadful mess with a lot of fires everywhere, and appeared pretty disorganised, with parties of soldiers about the place wandering around and looking lost. I remember particularly an extremely smartly turned out 40mm Bofors gun and team on the jetty acting as A.A. defence with a cheery young gunner subaltern and an Irish guardsman crawling along the jetty on his hands and knees in the very final stages of exhaustion but still fairly immaculate and still dragged his rifle with him.

I went back to the boat. Apart from various ships and craft berthing swiftly and roughly with varying degrees of expertise, there were occasional shells dropping about. I took 102 out of the harbour and turned eastward, past the wreck of the "King Orry" and went onto main engines, and we sailed along about a quarter of a mile off shore towards La Panne. The beach was

long and flat, pure sand, stretching back to attractive sand-dunes, but these were now black with men, and there were various lines of soldiers straggling down to the sea in queues four or five deep. These queues came out into the sea where the soldiers, with help from naval beach parties, clambered into boats to ferry them out to the larger ships waiting off shore. It was immediately hugely clear that this system – all that appeared possible at the time – was like emptying a swimming pool with a fountain pen filler. It was going to take a long, long time which I didn't think we had; also it was absolutely dependent on the present flat calm weather. We were cruising at about 25 knots, when I saw some odd splashes ahead and was just wondering what they were when the coxswain pointed and mouthed "shells". (With the noise of the unsilenced main engines in those days you couldn't talk on the bridge.) We turned hastily back westwards and increased speed. I went ashore again and found Captain Bill Tennant on the jetty. He gave me a hand-written note for Admiral Ramsay in Dover, and told me to go back right away, taking as many soldiers off the jetty as I could. I think we took about 30 then, which was about all we could reasonably manage. We got back to Dover and I took the letter up to the Castle to the Admiral. We fell into our bunks at about midnight.

Woken at 6 with orders that we were to sail at 8 to go back to Dunkirk and report to Rear Admiral William Wake-Walker*, who was now acting as the Flag Officer off-shore in Dunkirk Roads, and flying his flag in the destroyer leader, HMS KEITH.

We got across to Dunkirk at about 9.30 to find quite a lively air-raid going on with a lot of Junkers 87 dive-bombers, the much disliked Stukas of those days, bombing the ships in the roads – the protected deep waters off the harbour. We weaved our way about at some 30 knots in amongst the wrecks and ships and destroyers, which were taking what evasive action they could in the fairly restricted channel. I was worried about running aground. Finally, we saw the Keith and made over towards her to report, and, as we approached, she was hit amidships. She signalled to us to come alongside, which was quite tricky, as she was listing, her rudder was jammed so that she was going in a circle and she was still moving quite briskly. However, we managed it by getting on the inside of her circle, and soon took off Rear Admiral William Wake-Walker, two or three of his staff officers, a badly wounded stoker and another wounded sailor. I was rather appalled by the wounded men, because the one vital thing, which I had forgotten and which was not an automatic issue in those days, was morphia – and we had none.

However, I had little time to consider that problem. The Admiral said he wanted to get to Dunkirk quickly to talk to Captain Tennant, so we got onto main engines and went. On the way, the raid was continuing, and one bunch of 3 Stukas

**Later Admiral Sir William Wake-Walker would have become C-in-C Mediterranean if he had not died at the early age of 57 in 1945.*



Soldiers waiting on the beaches to be evacuated

had a go at us - in those crowded waters there was no chance of twisting and turning, so I rang "Full Ahead" three times, which meant "For Heaven's sake, give her everything". We fairly shot along and the bombs all missed, though the last salvo I thought were really coming right inboard, and they came so close that they disappeared from view behind the transom, but happily didn't go off until they hit the bottom and we were 50 feet or so ahead. The boat bounced a bit, but everything seemed well and we shot into the harbour, and this time I came alongside on main engines so as not to delay things.

The Admiral told me to wait, which was no pleasure, since there were bombs and some shells falling about the place in a fairly hearty way, but there was nothing to do but wait. I found a lovely, little old drifter mine-recovery vessel and asked if I could lie alongside. I noted at the time that on the focsle sat a sailor, peeling spuds; and on the hatchway sat the drifter's captain. He had a loaf between his knees, a tin of marmalade in his left hand a knife in his right. These two, quite unconcerned by the bombs, falling aircraft, bursting shells and every other conceivable sort of noise, gave me morphia for the wounded, a morning paper and a tin hat, in place of mine which had gone overboard.

In due course the Admiral returned and told me to take him to Dover. While we had been in harbour Dawkins, the torpedoman, had made an admiral's flag out of a rather smart new dishcloth with a red stripe down the middle, on which he had painted a cross red stripe to make a St George's cross and then two red blobs on the inner cartons to make a rear admiral's flag. I showed it to the Admiral and asked if we might fly it, and he was delighted with it and said we certainly could. So we proudly sailed back to Dover as a flagship.

MTB 102 was ordered back at least half a dozen times but I must now honestly admit that I cannot remember how many crossings we made during the evacuation. Gradually one got more and more exhausted, and memories became clouded. We finally returned to Dover with the Admiral onboard again flying his flag. (He later also accepted his "flag" as a memento of his trips, and his son Captain Christopher Wake-Walker, has presented it back to 102 again.)

I think we all realised then that we had taken part in an historic occasion and indeed a nearly miraculous escape; the result of the failure of Dunkirk, if the enemy had really attacked or the weather blown up, would have been truly devastating and unthinkable.

The next day we sailed back to HORNET. We were kindly received there, and 102 went on the slip for a quick check over and repairs to the various bumps and dents, which I had inflicted in berthing her alongside unsuitable places in a hurry during the last 10 days. We all got a week's leave and needed it.

At this time the fearful drama of the defeat and fall of France was brewing up to its climax, and so as soon as we got back from leave we were wanted again. This time for the blocking of Dieppe (but that's another story).

Christopher Dreyer had a distinguished wartime career, He was awarded the DSC for Dunkirk, a bar to the DSC for a Channel action in August 1943 and the DSO for Operation Husky, the invasion of Sicily, in 1943 when he commanded the 24th Flotilla. He reached the rank of commander at the age of 26; unheard of today.

LIFE ONBOARD AN MTB (OR AN MGB) IN 1940

In early 1940 an admiral said, *In these little vessels the old-time wooden walls of England have been reborn*; he was not being romantic or poetic, but simply pointing out that the small ships of Coastal Forces were built of wood. Most were constructed in boatyards more used to yachts and pleasure craft. In 1940 the motor gunboats formed a small, offensive fighting force and one of the few naval elements taking the war to the enemy. They earned the label *Spitfires of the Seas* and to quote Robert Hichens *What MGB's like doing best is attacking E-boats*. Ton for ton, few vessels (apart from, ironically, the E-boat), could match the punch of an MGB.

Another senior officer reported *A considerable measure of hardship must be faced in living in these conditions. The limit of endurance is, broadly speaking, the amount the personnel could stand up to. It is the purpose of our flotillas to be "out there" waiting for the enemy through all types of weather*. He went on to describe a 48-hour North Sea/English Channel patrol as like going continuously round the Aintree course in freezing rain and in a howling gale, *You are hanging on by your hair one minute and your eyebrows the next*. Sea sickness was for many, especially for the inexperienced, a thoroughly unpleasant way of life (A few never got over it and had to transfer to General Service and big ships). But, of course, sea sickness, no matter how debilitating, could never be an excuse for failing to come on watch and staying on watch (with or without a bucket in reach).

On the bridge freezing winds, salt spray and driving rain could all contribute to further misery. And once soaked, it was usually impossible to dry out or get warm. Furthermore, the



CO and Cox'n on the bridge by C E Turner

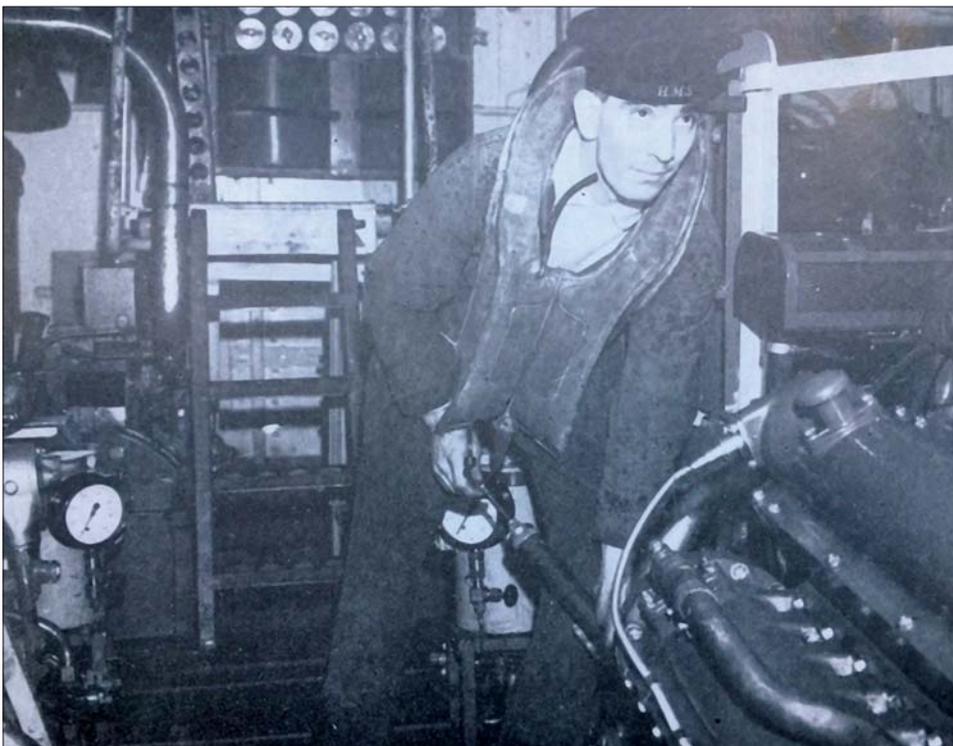
CO's had, of course, to keep their wits about them, plot position and course, spot the enemy before they spotted you, plan quickly, think decisively to come up with the right tactical decision in a matter of seconds. The crews had to be a close-knit, worked up team but the CO's had to be extraordinarily capable officers and show outstanding leadership; most were in their early twenties.

Nobody onboard had it easy. Things were different in the engine room but no more pleasant. It was an extremely cramped space, usually no more than four foot six inches head-room, an all pervasive smell of oil and a mind-numbing roar of engines (especially when all three were fired up) Furthermore,

engine room personnel, feet away from tanks of high octane petrol had no way of knowing what was happening during action but were only too aware of the possibility of action damage or worse. However, engineering personnel were of a fatalistic breed. A seasoned motor mechanic said *Any direct hits just rip through the shell of the boat and disappear through the other side*. The holes would be referred to as "slight Damage" in the action reports.

Probably the wireless operator was in the most cramped compartment onboard, the size of a dog kennel. And, of course, he had a vital responsibility of getting messages out and receiving them. His duties required total concentration and a high degree of training.

Even when not on duty, life was little better in the forward messdeck. There was usually just enough bench seating for



Cramped engine room



Forward Messdeck and Galley by C E Turner

all to sit, and it was drier and quieter but the motion of the boat in anything other than slow speed in calm waters was erratic and unpleasant. There was the continuous shuddering and slamming; everything which could move, did. There was, inevitably, many leg injuries, and sometimes upper body injuries from flying objects. When the boats stopped with engines idling or an anchor, they would roll considerably, 40 degrees each way was common.

There were not enough bunks for everybody ("hot bunking" was the norm) but often sleep was impossible anyway.

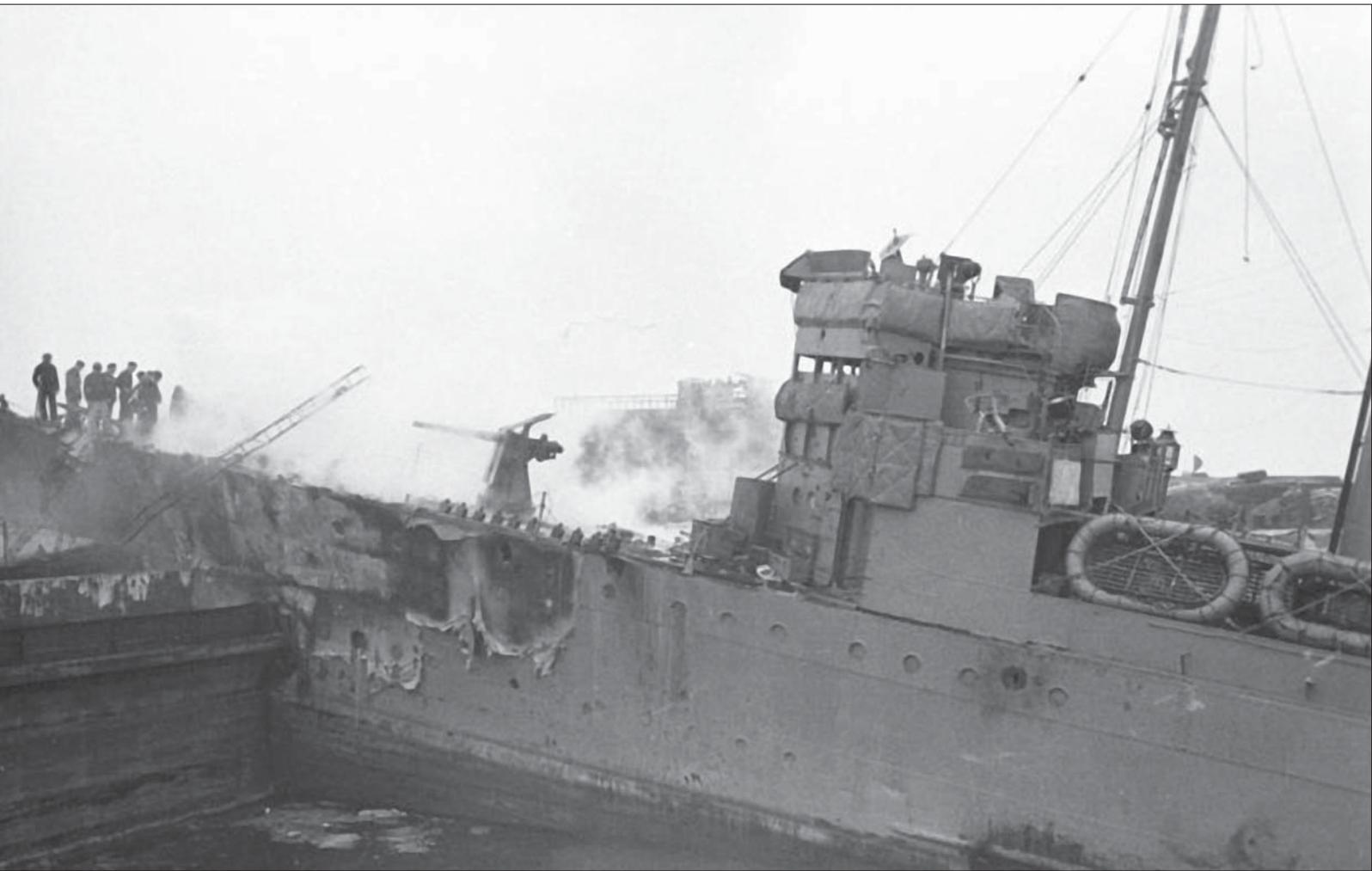
Naval historic records show that throughout the war there were always more volunteers applying to join Coastal Forces than were needed. Very few volunteered to return to General Service. There is no doubt that there was a great *Esprit d'Corps*. Morale remained high, and indeed the proportion of gallantry awards and chance of action were proportionally higher than any other branch.

One 18 year-old rating joined Coastal Forces having been torpedoed and sunk twice. He said he chose Coastal Forces because his mother (he was her only son) thought this meant

he would spend the rest of the war in a nice safe job on the coast. Some veterans recall the old Breton fishermen's prayer stuck up on the bridge or messdeck "O God be good to me; Thy sea is so wide and my ship is so small"



An uckers game on deck (At least it must have been warm weather)



HMS Campbeltown rammed up against the dock gates just before she exploded

ST NAZAIRE – “THE GREATEST RAID OF ALL TIME”

The St Nazaire Raid has also been covered in detail in previous newsletters but this attack on an important and heavily defended naval base features large in the history of Coastal Forces for good reason. This was an audacious, carefully planned and brilliantly executed operation but it came with a very heavy price.

A few words to remind. St Nazaire was targeted because the loss of its dry dock would force any large German warship in need of repairs, such as *Tirpitz* and *Bismarck*, to return to home waters by running the gauntlet of the English Channel or the Iceland/UK gap. The obsolete destroyer HMS *Campbeltown*, which was expendable and packed with well-hidden explosives, would be rammed into the Normandie dock gates. A numerically large force of Coastal Forces vessels, mainly motor launches, was deployed to escort *Campbeltown* and to land commandos who would create as much havoc and destruction ashore as possible.

The Coastal Forces units came under concentrated, sustained fire from the heavily fortified gun emplacements ashore, but those that could still pressed ahead to their objectives and landed their commandoes. However, by the end of the night German

gunfire had sunk, set ablaze, or immobilized virtually all the small craft and few were left to evacuate the commandos; the MLs were slow, relatively lightly armed and had little protection to incoming fire.

An eyewitness recalls “I saw an ML set on fire from a quick-firer gun which was only on its mark for seconds. As the tracers zipped into the side of the ML there was a small shower of sparks and then a tiny flicker of flame. One wanted to shout to the crew but they were too far away and there was too much noise. In a matter of seconds it grew and then there was an explosion ...”

Campbeltown exploded the next day, the aim had been achieved and the dock was out of action for the rest of the war but of the 611 men who undertook the raid, 228 returned to Britain, 169 were killed and 215 became prisoners of war. The commandos fought their way through the town to escape overland but many surrendered when they ran out of ammunition or were surrounded by the Wehrmacht. German casualties included over 360 dead (some of whom were killed after the raid when *Campbeltown* exploded.) To recognise their bravery, 89 members of the raiding party were awarded decorations, including five VCs. One of the recipients, a posthumous award, was to Able Seaman Savage;

EXTRACT FROM CITATION

Able Seaman Savage, who was gun-layer of a pom-pom in MGB 314, engaged enemy positions ashore, shooting with great accuracy. Although he had no gun-shield and was in a most exposed position, he continued firing with great coolness until he was finally killed at his gun.

The official citation went on to say, *“This Victoria Cross is awarded in recognition not only of the gallantry and devotion to duty of Able Seaman Savage, but also of the valour shown by many others, unnamed, in Motor Launches, Motor Gun Boats and Motor Torpedo Boats, who gallantly carried out their duty in entirely exposed positions against Enemy fire at very close range”*

**“HITCH”, LIEUTENANT COMMANDER
ROBERT HICHENS, DSO*, DSC**, RNVR**

No collection of World War Two Coastal Forces exploits, the high points and extraordinary achievements, would be complete without tribute to Temporary Acting Lieutenant Commander Robert Hichens, DSO*, DSC**, RNVR. He was not only the most respected, successful and highly decorated Coastal Forces officer of the war, Hitch (or sometimes Hich) was also the most admired, well-known and genuinely liked officer. He, like so many reservist officers, gave up a successful civilian life to go to sea and to serve his country. As a Cornishman, he knew the sea and had had plenty of small boat and yachting experience. (He also drove racing cars competitively which gives a clue to his daring and pugnacious personality)

Hitch took part in some 40 operational patrols and was in action 14 times. It has been difficult to pick out one which exemplifies him and his outstanding wartime achievements. His

audacious ambush and attack on a tanker convoy off Alderney on 1 July 1942 was by any standards a very significant tactical success and showed that, with flair, leadership, nerve and superb team-work, the depth charge could be used to devastating effect. We also have Hitch's own words to tell the story:

The Aldis lamp, carefully shaded from ahead, flicked out the thrilling signal: long, short, “Enemy in sight”. Silently, signlessly, the unit fell into line ahead, the fighting formation. The wind was in our teeth, we could not be heard; we should not be seen until right upon them; we had effected surprise, the most important factor of all in this warfare of speed and wood and petrol, against size and steam.

They were large trawlers, clearly visible now, heading west at about 8 knots. I hung debating that inevitable question, when to make the signal for pulling in the centre engines. The danger of being heard, against the danger of being caught without one's speed.



Convoy ambush – engines opened up for final attack by C E Turner

With a fresh head wind the former was the lesser evil. The light flicked twice; the unit burst into an ominous growl; the spray parted wide with the speed increased to 20 knots. We were level now with the offshore and rearmost vessel. She had seen us at last. She was challenging, two longs and a short. I dared not wait longer, the next move might be a well-aimed four-inch brick and I pressed the fire buzzer. She could not miss at that range. Less than a cable. Neither could we!

The next few minutes provided a welter of impressions for me, beginning with a crescendo of noise and light, passing through tense anxiety and ending with stark fear such as I had never known before. Three poms-poms, six Oerlikons and six Lewis guns burst into life almost simultaneously from the gunboats. With the gun muzzles a few feet from one's ear, the noise was terrific, the light from the muzzle flashes, the tracer and the bursting shells, dazzling and bewildering, the effect most gratifying. That trawler, hard hit and surprised, scarcely returned fire at all.

We were accelerating now, tending to turn in across her bows towards the other trawler, when I saw a small tanker ahead. In a flash the position was clear. The two trawlers were the stern escort of the tanker; there were almost certainly more escort vessels ahead. But here was our chance, the near escort subdued; the way into the tanker open and exposed.

I turned and made a long red flash to the fiercely firing boat astern; the signal to disregard the Senior Officer's movements. "We'll depth charge the bastard", I shouted to Curtis, the Cox'n. It was all he needed. He knew what was required of him. I lifted the throttles high as he headed in across her bows. The little boat leaped quivering with unleashed power, her guns projecting streams of brilliant light into the rapidly nearing hull.

Head (Lieutenant Francis Head, the XO) was by me now. "Stand by to let go port depth charge," I yelled.

The stream of shells hitting the enemy vessel, some penetrating, some bursting on the outside, lit up the outline of the ship, as though she was one of Brock's famous firework images on the last night of Henley. In the vivid, scintillating glare her bow wave, pressing outward and upward at what must have been her maximum speed, caught my eye and held me transfixed.

I had been conning the Cox'n on, at least so I thought; but in the uproar and confusion I doubt if he had heard or understood anything. Would we clear that upthrown white bow wave, that sharp straight bow? I thought not, but I could do no more. It was out of my control. Curtis had the wheel and I must leave it to him.

Hitch then describes how they had practised this highly dangerous manoeuvre on a Harwich trawler and come so close to the trawler's bows, a few feet away, as to soak the latter's crew with the gunboat's spray. He goes on to say:

In the event I think we cleared the enemy's bow by less than ten feet, after one of the most magnificent pieces of steering by Curtis that I ever witnessed. But not before we had received a withering blast from the disengaged escort vessel, just astern and to port of the tanker, and from the latter herself almost overhanging us. You could feel the boat shudder at the shower of blows; shrapnel flew whining in all directions; a dazzling blaze of fire burst forth at my very feet in the wheelhouse.

But we had got there. Head had pulled the depth charge release at the exact moment and a few seconds later the boat shook to the underwater explosion. It had been a model attack. Just one of those rare occasions when everything goes right. And rare indeed they are!

But MGB 77 was hard hit and Hitch goes on, with candid honesty, to say he came to know real fear; the wheelhouse was ablaze. Thoughts of never seeing his family again flashed through his mind but an ingrained sense of duty and realisation that "something" needed to be done very quickly became uppermost in his mind. He got down into the wheelhouse with Francis Head and succeeded in temporarily subduing the fire. However, another fire had broken out in the after magazine. Able Seaman Barnes, the after Oerlikon aimer, although severely wounded, jumped down into flaming pools of oil to join Hitch in bringing this fire too under control. There was every chance that the pans of 20 mm ammunition exploding.

For this extraordinary attack by a vessel with no heavier guns than 20mm Oerlikons and the audacious use of a depth charge dropped right under the enemy's bows, Robert Hichens was awarded a Bar to his Distinguished Service Order. From a tactical point of view and, as Hitch said himself, this was the "perfect" attack; all the circumstances were in his favour and, of course, he had a well worked up team who had practiced this very manoeuvre. Nevertheless, it was extremely dangerous and required split second timing. The immediate aftermath showed real damage control teamwork, from commanding officer to able seaman, and bravery in tackling and putting out at least two fires (Barnes was awarded the Conspicuous Gallantry Medal, a rare and high gallantry award). It could have so easily ended differently if, for example, there had been a magazine explosion.



*MTBs leaving HMS MANTIS, Lowestoft in support of north bound convoy under E-Boat threat in the North Sea,
by Sub Lieutenant D d'E Head, RNVR, 1943*

ONE BY ONE...

*One by one they go to sea
Crews fallen ceremonially
With the brisk, prim grace
Of another age –
Of a sea tradition's heritage.
But beyond the boom with a jubilant roar
They open out for the Bretagne shore,
And we who watch from casements wide*

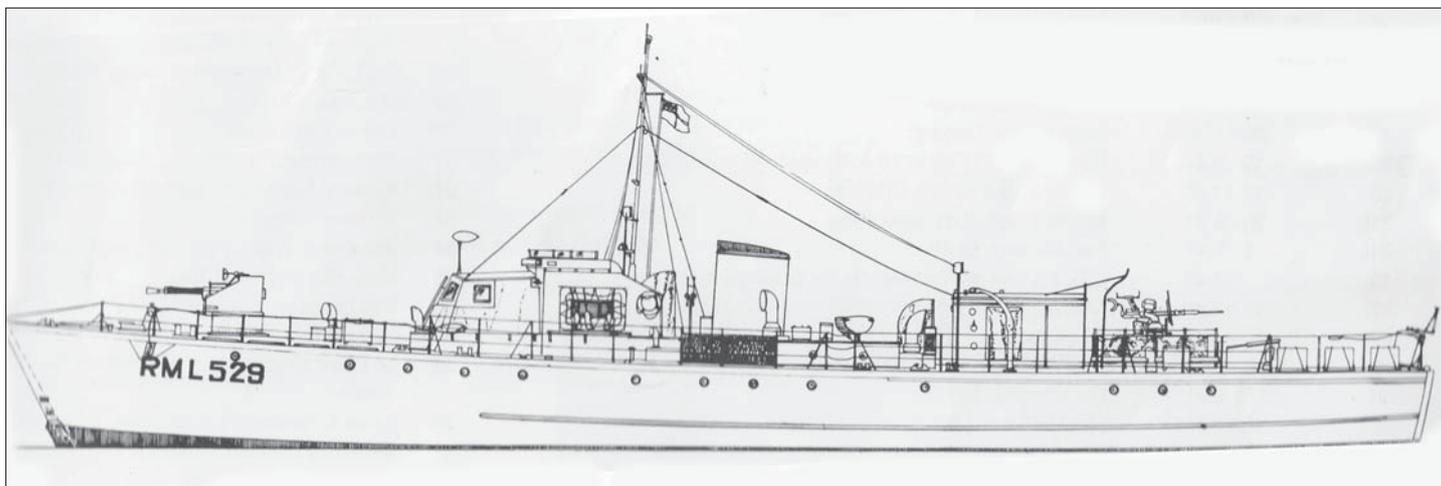
*See them leaping to meet the tide,
Follow the swirl of gleaming foam,
And never know who will come home,
Hear engine's fading swoon
And smell Syringa beneath the moon*

Part of a poem by an unknown WRNS officer, 1943.
Published in NL 26

THE RESCUE MOTOR LAUNCHES

The Rescue Motor Launches (RML) were Fairmile B motor launches adapted to meet the operational need to rescue aircrew and survivors from sinkings from the waters of the North Sea and Channel. Speed was of the essence as survival time in these cold waters was very limited. The boats were given a "bolt-on" upper deck sickbay compartment aft but they were still armed so that

rescues could take place in enemy waters and the boats could, if need be, defend themselves. The RML mission might have been at the more unglamorous end of the spectrum but it still called for excellent navigation and steady nerve to pluck survivors from the water, often under the noses of the enemy. There were one some 40 RMLs; it is interesting the crews from over 20 RMLs were given gallantry awards or mentioned in despatches.



RML529

One such example of a rescue was recounted by Lieutenant Don Mackintosh who commanded RML 512 and who was mentioned in despatches.

Shortly after midnight came a signal to RMLs 512 and 498 from the Naval Officer-in-Charge Humber to the effect that during the afternoon contact had been lost with a Beaufighter. Another plane had reported the position of a dinghy four miles west of Texel Island and from enemy coastal positions. The two skippers conferred – how accurate was the information, what was the current and drift, what were the enemy forces in the vicinity? We set course to arrive first light. The weather stayed pleasant; there was a haze which had mixed blessings screening us from the enemy but making spotting the dinghy more difficult.

A shout from the bridge “Aircraft Red Two Oh” ... it was a German Blohm and Voss flying Boat. And then we saw the dinghy... the German decided to turn away from the dinghy. We head a “Good Morning” in a very English accent.

During the pick up, we became aware of four ME210s circling and coming as close as 100 yards. We were sitting ducks but the pilots seemed unsure of our identity, our ensigns were hanging limply. So we held our fire and, instead, waved in a most friendly way. Two or three times one of them would dive low as if to force our hand ... it says much for our young men and fairly novice crews that they held their nerves. Eventually we move north at slow speed; the Germans seemed to lose interest.

COASTAL FORCES VERSUS THE U-BOAT

There were few engagements with German submarines, the much-feared U-Boats; that was waged for most of the war across the major oceans of the world as the U-Boats sought to cut off the vital supplies to the Allied countries in Europe by attacks on the convoys. The U-Boats had tried to do the same in World War One. In both world wars, the Admiralty expected U-Boats to operate close inshore and attempt to blockade ports. Large numbers of motor launches were built in both world wars to counter this perceived threat, 580 Elco motor launches in the First World War and the 500 Fairmile B motor launches in the Second. They were designed to operate in shallow waters, were equipped with basic detection equipment and armed with depth charges. But apart from the obvious exception of U-47's dramatic attack on HMS ROYAL OAK in Scapa Flow, this threat never really materialised and the motor launches went on to give wide-ranging and valuable services in other operational roles.

There is one U-Boat encounter which, however, deserves mention, if only because it was so unusual. In April 1943 a convoy of “Dog” boats, motor launches and armed trawlers left Milford Haven for the Mediterranean. Len Reynolds, then a midshipman and the navigating officer, in one boat reported:

“Corny (Lt Cornelius Burke, RCNVR) and I were on watch when, at 0100, the peace of the night was suddenly shattered. As from nowhere, a stream of tracer came floating in from the port bow.”

This died down but Reynolds went on to say, *“At 0220 queer things began to happen on the starboard beam – searchlights and gunfire we thought we may be under attack by E-Boats”*

A commanding officer in another boat completed the story, *“The attack was made by gunfire by two U-Boats on the surface (it seems they did not want to waste their torpedoes on our small vessels) The gunfire set Maitland's boat (MTB 657) on fire (later extinguished). After a short while we found some men in the water. They were wearing submarine escape apparatus. They were the remnants of the U-Boat crews.”*

It seems that, having engaged with guns, the U-Boats broke off, one turned to port, the other to starboard, went round in a circle and then collided – fatally, both sank.

SCORE SHEET: COASTAL FORCES 2, U-BOATS NIL

THE MEDITERRANEAN *“Engage anything, anytime, anywhere”*

The last newsletter recounted the extraordinary audacious attack on the Axis Forces at Cap Bon when three ‘Dog’ boats, flying the swastika flag and for a critical short time mistaken for E-Boats, under command of Lieutenant Stewart Gould were able to get close inshore, complete vital intelligence gathering and then cause mayhem and havoc, sinking five ships, damaging shore installations and destroying several aircraft. Gould was one of the most pugnacious and successful young officers. His motto was “Engage anything, anytime, anywhere”. He was killed at the end of this operation when his boat, MTB 639, came under intense fire from land, sea and air. As has been pointed out, he should have been awarded the Victoria Cross but bravery was shown at all levels and there is one account by 639’s telegraphist, John Hargreaves, which shows what it was like below during battle, his commitment to duties even after the order to abandon ship had been given and with the tragedy of a



Telegraphist in his WT office

personal loss, the death of his brother in the same action. These are his words:

Down in the W/T office, it was obvious we were getting badly battered up top; it was like being in a shed with a tin roof in a hailstorm! I was ordered to call up Sousse and ask urgently for aircraft support, giving our position. I got no answer but kept belting it out. Whilst doing that, I heard ‘Abandon Ship’ ordered and remembered a list of things I had to do. First, activate the detonators in the IFF (Friend or Foe apparatus) and shove the confidential books, codes etc in the safe and carry the safe up on deck and drop it overboard and then press the button in the charthouse to explode the detonators.

It was very unusual that my brother Frank was serving (as an AB) in 639, and I knew his action station was on the bridge. I climbed up there and found absolute chaos -everything was smashed. Frank was lying dead by his .303 machineguns ... I found the semaphore flags under the skipper’s body (the Aldis lamp was smashed) and I signalled 633 and 637 to come alongside now.

WELL AND TRULY ... AGROUND

Temporary Acting Lieutenant Commander Tim Bligh was one of the most distinguished and highly decorated officers in Coastal Forces; he was awarded the DSO, OBE, DSC and Bar and was mentioned in despatches four times.

In May 1943 Bligh requested permission to take his boat, MTB 61 which had been fitted with captured Breda 20 mm guns in lieu of torpedo tubes, into Kelibia Harbour, Tunisia to attack a concentration of enemy shipping lying under the protection of shore batteries. The charts showed a narrow channel with 10 foot of water. Under cover of darkness 61 went silent on the centre engine and stealthily crept down the channel. She went firmly aground.

There was a standard routine for this situation; All the crew went aft and jumped up and down. This did not work. And then everything of weight, including depth charges (disarmed) and Bligh’s private library, were quietly dropped overboard. An anchor line and anchor were taken out astern using the Carley float and dropped. All the crew hauled on the rope and the engines went full astern, again without success. Bligh went over the side into about 3 foot of water to do his own survey and concluded 61 would never come off. At last the enemy woke up. There were challenges from ashore followed by warning shots (but all rounds passing high; it seems the enemy could not believe an enemy vessel was so close inshore) A signal was sent to MTB 71, an American designed PT-boat waiting outside the



Tim Bligh onboard a surrendered E-boat at the end of the war

harbour, to come up the channel very, very carefully and be ready to take 61's crew. Petrol was poured into 61's bilges and confidential books and equipment destroyed. Bligh ordered his crew overboard and wade over to 71. He fired his signal pistol into the petrol. The result was dramatic and Bligh was blown out of the bridge onto the torpedo tube mounting. The enemy gun positions open fire in force and poured concentrated fire

into the burning 61, thus ensuring her total destruction, as Bligh had intended. All the crew were successfully rescued by 71.

This was a minor incident in the context of the Mediterranean war but it illustrates Bligh's leadership in the face of extreme danger. This caused for a strong nerve and a cool head. Bligh was awarded a mention in despatches, perhaps the only case in history of this award to a naval officer having put his ship aground.

CLANDESTINE OPERATIONS

Coastal Forces clandestine operations were extensive, varied and spanned all the global theatres of both world wars. The boats, CMB's of WWI and MTB's/MGB's of WWII, were well suited for clandestine work. With their shallow draft and manoeuvrability, they could get close inshore. In WWII they were used to land and recover agents, equipment, arms and munitions, invariably at night and under the noses of the enemy. They were also often sent out to find and bring back hundreds of RAF and allied aircrew who had bailed out over enemy territory. Commandoes were landed before and collected after raids behind enemy lines. These raids often resulted in disproportionate damage, disruption and destruction. They were also a great morale boost to the local populations of those countries which had been invaded. Clandestine operations also often involved gathering intelligence. It was critical to the success of an invasion plan to have a complete intelligence picture – beaches, harbours, coastlines, gun emplacements and, of course, anti-invasion obstructions (Many of the latter had explosive devices incorporated) The intelligence gathering operation for D-Day was massive; even samples of the sand from the beaches were taken in order to assess the viability of landing heavy vehicles. All these operations required absolute secrecy and were inevitably extremely dangerous. The boats had to creep inshore silently on the centre silent engine. They were very vulnerable to incoming fire, even from small arms. They relied on stealth and silence. If they were detected and engaged, only an immediate burst of speed using all engines and evasive manoeuvring could get them out of trouble.

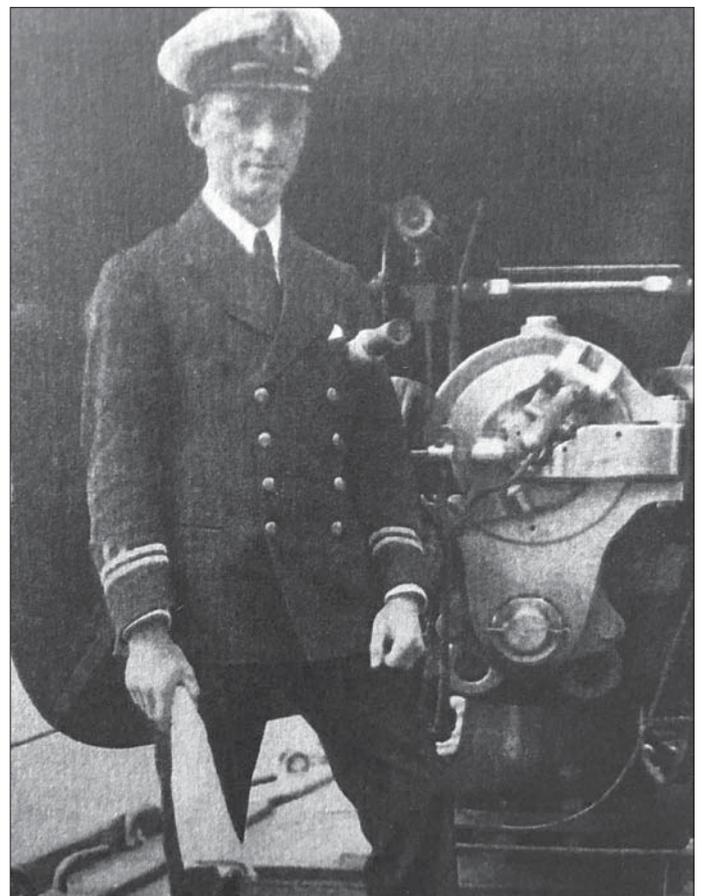
There are few clandestine operation records from the First World War. The first operation was, in fact, in 1919 when the British Intelligence Service and the Royal Navy became embroiled in the Russian Civil War. The Soviet Revolutionary Red Army was fighting bitter battles on vast fronts against Royalist White Russians. The British Government had high stakes in keeping stability and trade flowing in the Gulf of Finland and deployed a significant expeditionary naval force to the Baltic. The Secret Service were also very much involved and managed to include in the deployment two CMB's and crews for intelligence work.

In May 1919 the head of MI6, Sir Mansfield Cummings (known as "C") had a particular problem. A British agent, Paul Dukes, had infiltrated spies into the Bolshevik government

and made copies of top secret documents, but he was isolated in Petrograd (now St Petersburg). Dukes had to be brought out. The 29 year old naval lieutenant Augustus Agar, an experienced CMB officer, was asked to undertake the seemingly suicidal mission to achieve this.

Agar and a cadre of experienced naval personnel, along with a couple of 40-foot CMB's had been secretly sent out to the Baltic. They were unofficially attached to the RN forces based at Terriokin in neutral Finland which was within striking distance of Kronstadt, the key naval base and port for Petrograd.

For various reasons Agar never managed to get Dukes out of Russia (Dukes later managed to get out using overland routes). However, Agar's covert incursions into enemy waters led to his planning and execution of an extraordinary attack on the major Soviet naval base at Kronstadt. His sinking of the heavy cruiser *Oleg* has already been covered.



Lieutenant Augustus Agar RN in 1917

His extraordinary attack and the sinking of the cruiser Oleg have already been covered earlier in this newsletter, as has the second attack by more CMBs, some larger and carrying two torpedoes, against Soviet battleships and other major units a month or so later. This latter operation also achieved outstanding successes.

Admiral Cowan, who had directed naval clandestine operations in World War One, wrote; "Their cool, disciplined and daredevil gallantry turned what the outside world would have called a forlorn hope into a legitimate operation which met with far greater success than I ever hoped."

During the Second World War, the essential contribution which Coastal Forces could provide to the clandestine and intelligence war effort had become much better appreciated. Coastal Forces boats were to become crucial in the complex and extensive clandestine and resistance operations in central Europe and in occupied France in particular. In the Eastern Mediterranean Coastal Forces were also to play a pivotal role in supporting the partisan operations in Albania and Yugoslavia. The boats were equipped with special radios, suitable for communications with agents in enemy territory. But once clear of land the boats were on their own. Air cover was provided but only outside enemy coastlines and airspace.

As the war progressed, the boats were supplied with QH – a naval version of an RAF equipment which gave a fix on shore-based radio transmitters. Echo-sounders were a great aid considering the inshore activity being undertaken. For night-time navigation the boats used lighthouses, which were kept lit for the use of German convoys. Nevertheless, despite these basic aids, great navigational skill was required; the precise location for a landing or recovery of agents had to be pinpointed.

The earliest Clandestine Operation in World War II was in June 1940. This involved the landing and recovery of agents off the Brittany Coast near Brest. Supporting Coastal Forces were a number of "fishing" boats, which as the war progressed, were formed into a "Flotilla". Additionally, two French MTB's, an Air-Sea Rescue Launch (RAF 360), a replica tunnyman joined this disparate and unconventional command.

Several Coastal Forces officers were to become legend in the story of clandestine operations and Peter Williams was just one. While berthed at Portland in command of MGB 325 he fell into discussion with his friend, Peter Hodder, in command of an MGB involved in clandestine work. As fate would have it, Hodder's boat became immobilised and Williams had to take his place in MGB 325, in a mission rescuing an English agent from the shores of Brittany. So, with two additional specialist officers onboard, Lieutenants Letty and Davis, he ventured on his first of many clandestine missions. This was to the rugged stretch of Brittany coastline known as the *Cote de Granit Rose*. Not revealed to Williams during that mission was the fact that the two officers he was carrying belonged to a secret Naval Intelligence section under the command of Captain Frank

Slocum Royal Navy, Deputy Director Operations Division (Irregular). Frank Slocum was a veteran of First World War Coastal Forces and since the formation of his department he had achieved many successes with the limited resources at his disposal. With temporary loaned Coastal Forces craft and an Inshore Patrol Flotilla of fishing boats, he had clearly demonstrated the value of naval intelligence working with the French resistance. However by the end of 1943 it was becoming increasingly difficult to get craft from the over stretched Coastal Forces. Captain Slocum therefore persuaded the Admiralty to form a Coastal Forces Flotilla, the 15th MGB Flotilla, to be employed exclusively on undercover operations.

At the end of 1942 Williams was to undertake a further operation, Operation Cabaret, which would take him across the North Sea to the Skagerrak, between the north coast of Denmark and the south coast of Norway. Two Norwegian merchant ships were waiting at Gotherburg in neutral Sweden for escort to England. The ships were secretly loaded with much needed special steel and ball-bearings. Williams had the task of smuggling crews and weapons to the ships. However, the operation was affected by mountainous seas and eventually aborted. On Operation Scarf, an operation to pick up the female agent Charise, one of the crew held out his hand to steady her as she came onboard, with the words *ici mademoiselle*; she replied; *It's OK Jack I've been on one of these boats before*. On a further occasion he met three German E-Boats on a reciprocal course but he coolly kept his course and, when challenged, he fumbled his reply. The Germans briefly opened fire and then ceased after 15 seconds. Subsequent reports seen after the war revealed that they had been reprimanded for opening fire on friendly forces. On Operation Split in April 1943 he was warned of the presence of German destroyers at anchor off Ille de Batz, close to his destination. As he completed his mission, having collected an agent, he was caught in crossfire between the enemy destroyers and British and Canadian destroyers. With his boat silhouetted by German star-shell, Williams frantically signalled the German destroyers with their own recognition signals, an act which seemed to save the day.

Between June and December 1943 the focus had been on picking up agents in France for training in England and then returning them to organise local resistance groups. This included landing arms and ammunition, on which the whole of their operations depended. The 15th MGB Flotilla was now operating from Dartmouth. The last thing that the boats of the flotilla received before sailing was the German communication codes. How this information was obtained was only revealed after the war. It resulted from one of the great scientific achievements of the war - the unravelling of "Enigma", the top secret German coding machine. Scientists were able to intercept and decode all the secret codes.

The men of his flotilla were awarded 14 DSCs and 27 Distinguished Service Medals and, on the 50th anniversary of

D-Day in 1994, Williams was made a *Chevalier of the Legion d'Honneur* for his war time action. A memorial to MGB 502 is now on one of the beaches Williams knew well, Beg-an-Fry, known to his crew during the war as 'eggs and fry'.

Other officers were prominent in building Coastal Forces Clandestine organisation. Ted Davis was but one; he had come into contact with Peter Williams at Portland and they were to work closely together throughout the war. Davis was to become Captain Slocum's Operations Officer at Dartmouth eventually rising to the rank of Commander with 30 undercover operations under his belt. Lieutenant Ronald Seddon, CO of MTB 718, and his First Lieutenant Guy Hamilton, were to become involved in many successful operations. Two of Ronny Seddon's crew, Leading Seaman Albert Dellow, his second coxswain, and a young Canadian fisherman, Ordinary Seaman Hayward Rockwood, became legendary in their handling of a surfboat. David Birkin, a specialist navigator who took part in several of MGB 318's very successful operations, was to bring new navigational skills to operations. He was embarked on Operation Envious on 3 November 1943, which was to sail to Ile Rosservor, a tiny island off the French coast. The operation was to reconnoitre the island and collect 15 grounded Allied airmen including secret intelligence reports which included detailed critically important information about the enemy's V1 and V2 rockets. As MGB 318 approached the rendezvous point things were not going well onboard. An engine problem was making progress difficult and the visibility started to deteriorate down to 200 yards. David Birkin had to virtually con the boat amongst the rocks from the chartroom. He was using his QH navigation equipment which then failed, leaving him navigate purely by sight. For several reasons that mission was unsuccessful and had to be repeated for a third time before the stranded air men were recovered. On the third occasion, accompanied by MGBs 318 and 329, the boats operated dangerously close to each other and to the rocky coastline, in high winds and choppy seas. On the third attempt to rescue the airmen, the number to be rescued had risen to 32 and MGB 318 had to endure one of the worst Channel crossings any of the crew had experienced. That operation was unsuccessful but as soon as they arrived back in their home port of Falmouth, they were turned around for another attempt, on Christmas Day. This time the weather was kinder and the rescue was successful.

Such was the nature of the Clandestine Operations. Lieutenant David Birkin was to be awarded the DSC and *Legion d'Honneur*. Others prominent in Coastal Forces Clandestine Operations include Lieutenant Freddie Bourne of MTB 344. He and his crew were to participate in 17 operations off the north coast of Brittany, Normandy and the Channel Islands. On one occasion Freddie had occasion to call on Admiral Hughes-Hallett at his headquarters in the Medina

River on the Isle of Wight. The Admiral made it clear that he viewed these clandestine raids as a total waste of war effort. (He clearly did not share the enthusiastic views of the Prime Minister Winston Churchill.) To register his displeasure Freddie zoomed away from the Isle of Wight at high speed, in full view of the Admiral.

Another major contributor was Lieutenant Bob Haggard who was, initially, a Scientific Officer before he was seconded to the RNRV. His work as a Scientific Officer was focussed on devising a method of distorting or disabling the enemy radio signals being used to direct German bombing aircraft to their targets. He joined Coastal Forces to help establish the exact positions and frequencies of enemy radar sites along the Channel coastline. This was in support of the D- Day landings. The aim was to jam enemy radar. There was an important secondary aim, to pinpoint the location of the enemy's radar stations so that decoys could be deployed to disguise the planned Normandy landings. It was MTB 255, based at HMS Aggressive at Newhaven, which undertook this work under *Operation Knitting*. This boat was commanded by Lieutenant Peter Aspinall. The work was absolutely crucial and highly secret. Bob Haggard was present and very much part of each of MTB 255's operations, which was prove to be of major importance for the D Day Landings.

The role of MTB 255 was to end in tragic circumstances. She was based in Ostend after D Day. The CO had gone ashore to the base Operations Room. He was hurrying back onboard to meet his sailing time when he saw his First Lieutenant, Sub-Lieutenant Mike Day, approaching. They were about 100 yards away from the boat when there was a colossal explosion following by a large fire. The cause, believed to be from MTB 255 starting her engines. Many other boats caught fire, destroying almost all the MTBs belonging to the 29th Canadian MTB Flotilla. There were many other fatalities amongst other MTB crews and the Belgian fire-brigade.

So what became of some of the officers involved in these operations? They were a select band of officers, exceptional leaders, brave and resourceful. Many went on to have interesting post war lives. Peter Williams returned to practicing as a solicitor and became chairman of the East Grinstead Conservative Party, Clerk to the Conservators of Ashdown Forrest, President of the Sussex Law Society and a farmer producing cream from his Hereford cows. He married the daughter of the aviation pioneer A V Roe. David Birkin married Judy Campbell, the singer of the post war hit song, "A Nightingale Sang in Berkeley Square" and father of actress Jane Birkin. Guy Hamilton went on to direct four of the early James Bond films and Mike Marshall, an Oxford blue and England rugby player prior to the war, was tragically killed when MGB 502 hit a mine five days after VE Day. (*The loss of 502, renumbered 2002, is covered later in this newsletter*).

Captain Trevor Robotham, RN

D-DAY –VITAL ROLE OF THE SMALLEST WARSHIPS – MEDUSA’S STORY

This is the story of one of 40 Harbour Defence Motor Launches (HDMLs) that took part in D-Day. Their roles were crucial to initial invasion. Ten vessels marked the entrances to narrow passages through German minefields for the invasion fleet, others acted as decoys (Operations Glimmer, Taxable and Big Drum) while others marked turning points for the aircraft taking the paratroopers to France.

First some background. Medusa was built in Poole as ML1387 and commissioned on 29th December 1943. Her commanding officer was Temporary Sub Lieutenant Maurice Liddiard RNVR, 30 years of age. ML 1387 was 72 feet long, powered by two Gardner diesels and armed with a 2 pounder, a 20mm Oerlikon and four Vickers ‘K’ machine guns.

Putting together this vessel’s history has required a great deal of research and detective work. Evidence exists in the form of written orders and reports, verbal evidence (not always first-hand) and books. Log books would have been a great source of information but most, including Medusa’s, were destroyed after the war (One has to wonder why when they formed authoritative historical records to the greatest seaborne invasion in history). In Medusa’s case research has been carried out by Brian Holmes and Alan Watson – and with that combination of surnames no stone would be left unturned!

The “Red Lists” held by the National Archive gave the locations of minor war vessels over this period. The 28 May 1944 list shows Medusa leaving Plymouth on 27 May and nothing further until 18 June when she is shown as being part of the 49th Flotilla based at Portsmouth.

The next clue is her actual orders. In the D-Day Western Force plans she is designated as a Channel Marker and ordered to sail from Portland to be at a position on the northern edge of the German minefield by evening of 4 June. She was to find her exact position using some of the latest and very secret navigational equipment (Outfit QM, later known as Decca Navigator) and could confirm she was in the right place by listening for morse letter D transmitted from an ultrasonic beacon on the seabed. She was to remain on location for the minesweepers to home in, sweep through the minefield and then remain on location as a marker for the main invasion fleet. The equipment was so secret that she carried demolition charges to be blown if there was a prospect of capture. A chance find in the D Day museum is a signal to Medusa and others at Portland on 2 June sealing the vessel - nobody could come onboard and nobody could go ashore. This was a huge responsibility for such a junior officer;

furthermore, the D-Day planners did not rate his or his crew’s chances of survival as high.

Now we know where she had to be and at what time, we can work back and deduce the departure time from Portland. Bearing in mind D Day was supposed to be the 5th June, she would have left in the early hours of the 4th. That means she was on her way before the order to delay everything by 24 hours was given. This ties in with crew testimony that they turned back and sheltered in Weymouth bay.

There were still some gaps in her movements, particularly running up to the 4th June but a huge archive called Fold 3 in the US provide some answers. It is all on-line and is easily accessible; ironically there are admiralty documents there that don’t seem to exist in the UK. A few more gaps were filled in.

We have found references showing that Medusa was issued with one of only 20 Decca navigator sets that were used on D day and also carried the RAF Gee system. Medusa might have been the first user of Decca on a major operation. A document in the National Archives entitled “Analysis of the value of QH and QM in Operation Neptune” included an interview with the CO of ML1398, a Lieutenant Liddiard, who confirmed they used both Decca (QM) and Gee (QH).

After the D-Day fleets had passed through the minefield channel marked by Medusa she was ordered to Portsmouth. We had crew stories of going close to Omaha beach and even landing. Later there is a story of Medusa hitting an underwater obstruction, damaging her asdic dome and flooding the forward compartment. A totally new story emerged when one of the wartime crew, Doug Withey, was talking to HRH The Princess Royal. He told of Medusa being hit by an American ship off Omaha and being saved from serious damage by the quarter



The dials from QM set No 19 (of the 20 that went to D-Day) on Medusa today

HEML	Attached to Force	Marking Channel No.	Longitude of PH 830 buoy in latitude 50° 05' N.	Approx. time of W/S Platilla passing position of buoy.	Characteristics of Beacons. Time - Period.	Type 78 T letter	Movements to take up marking position.	Movements on completion of marking.
1421	U	1	0 54 20 W.	H - 10.00	High 1/2 sec.	A	As arranged by C-in-C., Plymouth.	Return to Portsmouth through position Z to arrive at H.M.S.
1422	U	2	0 51 30 W.	H - 12.00	High 1/2 sec.	B		
1383	O	3	0 48 48 W.	H - 10.00	High 1 sec.	C	As arranged by F.O.I.C., Portland.	DEPART before dark on D day.
1387	O	4	0 45 44 W.	H - 12.00	High 2 sec.	D		
1391	G	5	0 43 05 W.	H - 10.40	Medium 1/2 sec.	F	Leave Southbound Gate 1000 D-1 via F buoy to be in marking position at 1600 D-1	
1392	G	6	0 39 04 W.	H - 11.10	Medium 2 sec.	G		
1407	J	7	0 36 12 W.	H - 10.40	Low 1/2 sec.	L		Proceed so as to report to Captain Southbound Sillings by 2300 D day.
1393	J	8	0 34 16 W.	H - 11.10	Low 1/2 sec.	M		
1416	S	9	0 31 20 W.	H - 10.40	Low 1 sec.	N		Proceed so as to report to Captain Northbound Sillings by 2300 D day.
1415	S	10	0 28 24 W.	H - 11.10	Low 2 sec.	P		

LEFT Locations for the channel markers, ML1387 is at position 4 for Omaha

BELOW LEFT Sealing order

BELOW Type 134 dome dredged up in Portsmouth Harbour

NO. 856-A

CLASSIFICATION T-O-P-S-E-C-R-E-T DATE 2 JUNE 1944

PRECEDENCE OPERATIONAL PRIORITY WRITE UP BY L.T. YUNDT

FROM: COMDESRON 18 ACTION: COM FORCE "O"

INFO:

ALL SHIPS ARE HEREBY DIRECTED TO BE SEALED X THERE WILL BE NO LIBERTY FOR OFFICERS AND MEN HENCEFORTH X NECESSARY WORK ASHORE WILL BE DONE UNDER THE SUPERVISION OF RESPONSIBLE OFFICERS X VISITORS TO SHIPS WILL BE ESCORTED TO PREVENT UNAUTHORIZED CONVERSATION X COM FORCE O PLEASE PASS FOR ACTION TO FOLLOWING SHIPS OF TASK GROUP 124.7 X VIDETTE VESPER L'AVENTURE L'ESCARAMOUCHE GREY OWL GREY FOX GREY GOOSE GREY SEAL GREY SHARK GREY WOLF PC'S 552, 553, 564, 565, 567, 568, 617, 618, 1225 SC'S 1291, 1307, 1332, 1353, 1354, 1361, ML'S 118, 153, 163, 304, 448, 187, 189, 193, 194, 214, 230, 907 HML'S 1383, 1387 X OCLL BRESSAY SKYE

D/TG. #2855

www.ddaymuseum.co.uk



badging. HRH was clearly impressed as she went to have a look at the stern before she left. This started a new line of detective work; a collision with an unknown vessel on an unknown date in a vague position in wartime! After a long search, the US Fold 3 provided the answer. The US subchaser (a bit like a Fairmile B) was in collision with Medusa on 10 June 1944 at a position just off Omaha beach. That one document confirmed that she went back across the channel, went in close to Omaha and gave credence to the verbal testimony we were given about other harrowing events in that location.

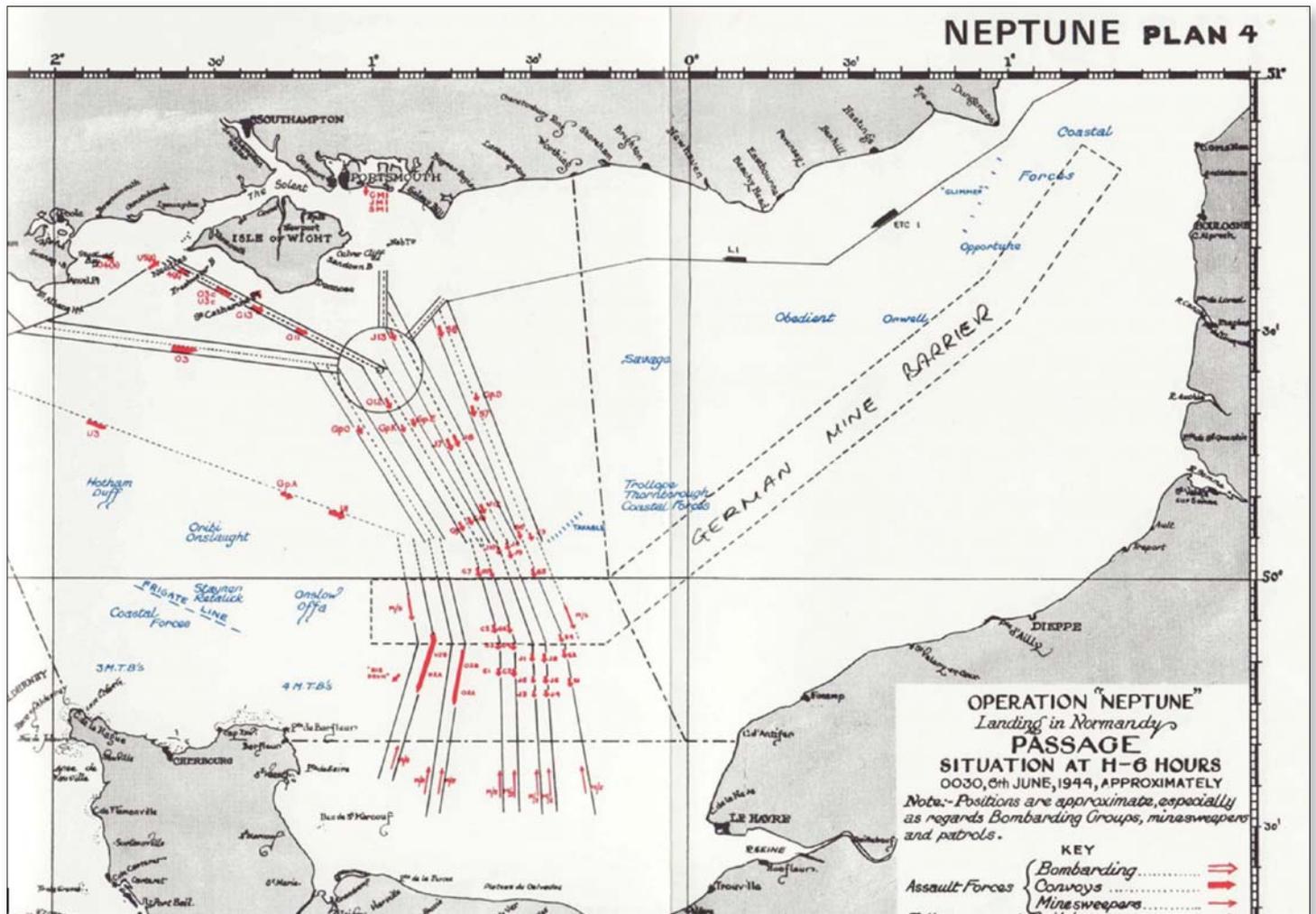
There were witnesses to an aircraft crashing close by with no survivors. Some of Medusa's crew landed on Omaha beach in the dinghy and were urgently recalled as the beach was mined. They saw other ships being hit and mined and at one point had to go back to the UK to ferry a very senior officer across to a large warship. He complained about the noise as the after Oerlikon had woken him up when they engaged an enemy aircraft! Running short of food they fished cases of supplies out of the water from among floating bodies off Omaha. This was a lot for a young crew to handle and some of the memories were still raw 70 years on.

As for the story about Medusa hitting the obstruction, we were told they had the choice of beaching her in France or trying to get back. They chose the latter and just made it back to Portsmouth where the damaged dome was dropped off, the hole plated over and away she went. While Portsmouth harbour was being dredged for the new carriers, up came a damaged ASDIC dome of the right type. I can't prove it was Medusa's but there is a very good chance. It's now in the Royal Navy museum at Portsmouth.

The above is just a flavour of the detective work that went into putting together an accurate record of what Medusa did and of the rigour one must employ in fitting together the fragments. There is always more to find but below is what we have so far.

Against all the odds, Medusa has survived as a sea going vessel under the care of the Medusa Trust (www.bmsmedusa.org.uk). She is based in Gosport, maintained and operated by volunteers and is frequently at sea, often with cadets gaining experience in operating her and learning of her history.

Alan Watson, OBE



Neptune plan showing the minefield and 10 swept channels



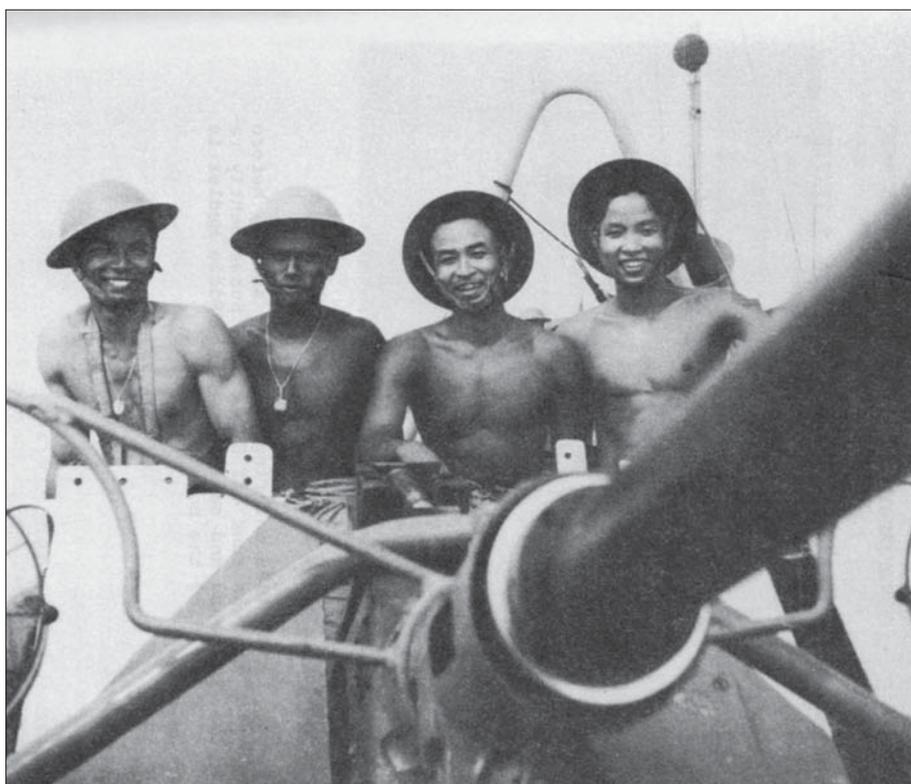
Medusa entering Portsmouth Harbour

ARAKAN – SOMETHING TOTALLY DIFFERENT

The Fourteenth Army was fighting on many fronts against a fanatical, war seasoned Japanese Army, this included driving the Japanese out of Burma (now Myanmar). The Fourteenth Army was called the Forgotten Army for good reason. For many in war-wary Britain, the Second World War ended on VE Day, 8 May 1945. But for thousands of servicemen in the Far East and their families back home, nothing could be further from the truth. Coastal Forces Units played a vital role in opening up another front from the sea along the coastline of Arakan, on the west coast. The Japanese were by the beginning of 1945 in retreat across the Far East and the Pacific regions but were far from defeated; indeed, with their ethos and national pride, the word surrender was simply not in their vocabulary.

During 1944 a substantial force of Motor Launches, mostly Fairmile B's, were assembled in UK, modified for tropical service, stored up for a very long passage via Capetown to India (14,000 miles, give or take) and then into the forward operating area off the Arakan coast. This theatre of war was as about as different to the Home Waters and Mediterranean as could be. The Arakan coastline is dense jungle, interspersed with estuaries, swamps and rivers called *chaungs*. The ML's with their 6-foot draught could navigate, with care and skill, up to 30 miles inland. The Japanese were dug in, in large numbers, well-armed and fanatical. They were certainly not thinking retreat, at least at the beginning of 1945.

For a personal account and reflections, we are grateful to Able Seaman Duncan Hill of ML 854 who contributed to Harold Pickles book *Untold Stories of Small Boats at War*.



ML Bofors Gun Crew having sunk two Japanese gunboats, May 1945

On 1 January 1945 two Combined Operation Pilotage Party (COPP) members came onboard 854 prior to the seaborne assault. MLs were called upon to penetrate the uncharted *chaungs* (Burmese word for rivers) to gather vital intelligence.

We proceeded at night stern first up the estuary behind enemy lines, observing the anti assault obstacles. Silence was essential. We kept engine revolutions to a minimum. At the anchorage, it was a case of keeping the anchor on a grass rope with a crew member standing by to cut it for a quick getaway.

Having got the info we needed we came under sustained fire, heavy shelling, machine guns and rifle fire from an unseen but very close enemy. The fire ripped through our superstructure causing minor casualties but as the Japs used armour-piercing shells they passed through the wooden craft without exploding. The Japs would string wire across the chaungs; sometimes at head-height, sometimes at mast-height; we lost our radar that way.

On the night prior to the landings, 8 COPP members were taken to the landing beach to destroy the obstacles with delayed charges. It was an anxious wait while the COPPs completed their dangerous task. At dawn, as the commandoes, approached the beaches – we saw the explosions. Three days later we discovered explosives between upper deck lockers left behind by the COPPs – they were ditched overboard.

Such operations occurred regularly. Some of the fiercest fighting was around Kangaw which was important because it commanded the coastal road. Duncan Hill goes on to say:

The Japanese launched suicidal attacks on the bridge head. The fierce fighting, much of it hand to hand, continued for about four weeks. As the mist lifted one morning, the MLs were shelled, mortared and sniped at; the guard rails would “ping” as they were cut by mortar and shrapnel.

After 4 months of extremely tense and dangerous operations, ML 854 was relieved and the fighting moved north as the Japanese retreated. The CO, Lieutenant Reginald Harris and the Cox'n, David Smith, both from the South African Naval Reserve, were awarded the DSC and DSM respectively.

At the end of the war J G H Gritten, the official historian of the Burma Campaign, would write:

The narrow chuangs that gash Burma coast were the hunting grounds of our Motor Launches. It's small but deadly warfare, in which the fighting spirit and comradeship of the little ships gets full play.

The Central Office of Information in the official record said:

In these operations the Arakan Coastal Forces and the Bengal Auxiliary distinguished themselves. ... The war in the chuangs called not only for daring in action but for unceasing care in the maintenance of vessels. It is an exacting job to keep your craft true after three months cruising through a swamp and the men

of Combined Operations in the Arakan won their battle because they were better than the enemy at everything. He was outfought, outwitted and outworked. As the Japanese retreated in this dark noisome vastness of mud and mangrove they found their waterways blocked by Coastal Forces. They were targeted by flies, mosquitoes, scorpions and the most horrible crocodiles, and without food and water the Japanese died in the hundreds.

A TRAGIC POST-SCRIPT

As a postscript to this anthology, there was one Coastal Forces tragic event which dramatically demonstrated that the Germany's surrender on 7 May 1945, did not immediately end the dangers of life at sea. The Fairmile D or Dog Boat, MGB 2002, left Aberdeen for Gothenburg, Sweden under the command of a renowned and decorated officer, Lieutenant Commander Mike Marshal, DSC*, RNVR. In addition to the complement of five officers and nineteen senior and junior rates, there were five official passengers including Lieutenant Commander Brian Bingham, MBE, DSC, RNR. The crew were exceptionally experienced and most had served through the war years with distinction. Eleven of the ratings had been awarded the Distinguished Service Medal. The purpose of the voyage was to "spring" two merchant ships, loaded up with vital ball bearings, and get the ships sailed to England.

The passage plan was a straight transit on a course of about 090 degrees across the North Sea to the Skagerrak. Peace in Europe had just been declared a few days earlier and this would have been considered a safe and fairly routine round trip.

MTB 2002 was expected to arrive at Gothenburg at 2000 on 12 May. One day and then two days passed with no news, no sightings, no signals. A search along her presumed track was initiated, first from the air by RAF Coastal Command and then two MTBs.

In fact, two ratings from 2002 were picked up by a Norwegian motor vessel late on 15 May. They had a terrible story to tell. At 0345 on 12 May MGB 2002 had struck a floating mine which exploded under the bridge area. Most of the crew were below and 2002 sank, in two halves, very quickly. Three of the crew made it to a Carley float. One of them died after drinking sea water. The other two, Petty Officer Toy Sheehan and Able Seaman Norman Hine, spent three days struggling to attract attention from passing ships and aircraft. Both had suffered severe injuries and gangrene had set in. They were eventually picked up by a Norwegian fishing vessel. They were landed and flown back to England and hospitalization; Tommy Sheehan had both legs amputated and Norman Hine lost all his toes. They both showed great determination to survival against all odds.



MTB 502, Subsequently re-numbered 2002



MS BRAVE BORDERER at speed

THE LAST ENGAGEMENT

The two Brave Class fast patrol boats, HMS BRAVE BORDRER and BRAVE SWORDSMAN, were the last Royal Naval “true” MTBs, armed with torpedoes and 40 mm Bofors guns and with an impressive 52 knot turn of speed (The other boats HMS SCIMITAR, SABRE and CUTLASS, which came into service around the same time, were unarmed training vessels). On 10 September 1965 HMS BRAVE BORDERER came under fire as she departed Waterford Harbour and was hit several times by an ancient anti-tank weapon called the Boys Anti-Tank Gun (The inventor was a Colonel Boys) fired by the IRA Killkenny Brigade headed up by one Richard Bethal. The IRA Brigade Commander had given the go ahead for the attack which would coincide with the Golden Anniversary of the Easter Uprising.

The Boys Anti-Tank gun dated back to before the Second World War; the IRA had stolen this one together with some rounds from the Irish Army. In 1965 it was rusty, the magazine was missing and the extractor did not work; the spent cartridge had to be extracted with a screwdriver after firing each round.

As BRAVE BORDERER proceeded at slow speed down river from Waterford, she presented a perfect target. The first two rounds of 0.55 inch amour piecing shells went straight through the thin hull and out the other side. Action stations



The Boys 0.55 in Anti-tank Gun, c.1937

was sounded off, all engines and turbines were flashed up. As the boat gathered speed a third round came inboard and caused serious damage to one of the engines. However, by this time, BRAVE BORDERER was out of range. She limped back to Torquay and was to spend some 6 months under repair at the cost of several million pounds. However, with great good luck, there had been no casualties.

The team of three IRA operatives were captured soon after by the Garda and imprisoned after trial (Bethal was to escape after he had sawed through the bars of his cell with a smuggled hacksaw)

So ends the story of the last attack on a Coastal Forces unit and, significantly, the attack was on the last true MTB in the Royal Navy.

We put the clock forward some 75 years for a glimpse into one of today's Coastal Forces Squadron vessels, HMS PUNCHER. She is one of 14 P2000 Class; at 68 foot in length and a permanent crew of 12 she is that far removed from a WWII Vosper MTB. We are grateful for contributions from her CO, Lt Phil Hack, and, for a rating's view, AB Dan Witt, Navigator's Yeoman.

HMS PUNCHER – A YEAR IN COMMAND & A DAY ON EXERCISE

Taking command of HMS PUNCHER during 2020 was challenging experience in a busy year. The COVID 19 pandemic was sweeping across the country but we still had to react quickly to a maritime emergency. A small day fishing boat had lost all power and was drifting towards the shore. The team leapt into action; whether it was engineers attempting to fix the vessel, the Executive Officer looking after the crew on what was a very hot day or the Navigator's Yeoman using his ingenuity to secure the vessel when we arrived on scene. It was a whole team evolution and not something we do every day. In the end we towed the stricken vessel into Plymouth and got it safely alongside.

HMS PUNCHER has also been conducting trials with the UK Border Force. These trials were experimenting how P2000s could potentially assist with guarding the integrity of UK territorial waters after BREXIT. Additionally, we assisted the UK maritime police, to join the protection measures for HMS QUEEN ELIZABETH during her first phase at sea. These were new tasks for the Squadron.

However, one of our most dynamic and special roles of HMS PUNCHER continues to be acting as 'the enemy' in various military exercises. We pop out of small harbours to attack, harass and generally annoy NATO warships under training. During Joint Warrior we played our part in the generation of UK Carrier Strike Group (CSG) including, HMS Queen Elizabeth, by putting the ships through their paces from the threat of small attack boats.

As I write this, we are about to sail for Strike Warrior to put the CSG through the ringer again before their first major deployment. A major part of this training will be to test the group's abilities to resist swarm attacks by small, fast hostile vessels. I am sure that those in Coastal Forces before us would recognise the experiences, team spirit and high morale of small P2000 team. Our forebears would have faced the same challenges an Irish Sea crossing in a Force 8!

A DAY ON EXERCISE

"I'll start the day by grabbing some toast and a cup of coffee before I start to prepare the ship for sea. The jobs I have to undertake I imagine are very similar to those from the previous Coastal Forces. I'll start with an upper deck walk round, checking the berthing lines, anchor and guardrails. Then I will check over the safety equipment like life rafts and life jackets. I rig the man overboard recovery stretcher before setting up the flying bridge with flags, radios and navigational aids. As with most responsibilities they have to be signed for and I will annotate in the ship's log that my checks are correct. Next, I will report the state of the seamanship department and any navigational warnings to the CO at the leaving harbour brief. After this I proceed on to the upper deck to do line handling for our departure.

Once underway I will secure the upper deck for sea before going to the flying bridge. Here I run the Tactical Communications for a co-ordinated departure with other P2000s and then into the exercise. During the exercise I will run flag hoists, communications, simulate being the enemy on the upper deck and take photographs. Outside of the exercise



Lieutenant Phil Hack, Commanding Officer

HMS PUNCHER

activity whilst at sea without a chef I will cook lunch for the crew. My other responsibilities include updating the ship's log, acting as helmsman (we still have no auto-pilot system and the ship's wheel is the biggest in the fleet) and any other yeoman activity such as Morse code signalling.

When we return to port, again I will do the line handling, before derigging the ship, washing the salt off and brightening the brass work. Lastly, I will cook the evening meal and prep

the tactical communications for the next exercise before finally getting a chance to relax in the mess. Everyone onboard has many secondary duties they wouldn't have on a big ship but we all muck in to get the work done. We are a close-knit team of five on our small patrol boat but we still hold our ship to the same standards as any other in the fleet."

Able Seaman Dan Witt, Navigator's Yeoman

JOHN ASCOLI (1935-2020)

In our last newsletter, we announced the sad news of the death of John Ascoli, a Trustee and then for some 15 years the Chairman of Trustees. As Chairman he was the backbone and driving force behind the Trust and was responsible for the strategic planning. He set the trust on course to meet its core objective, the establishment of a Coastal Forces Museum.

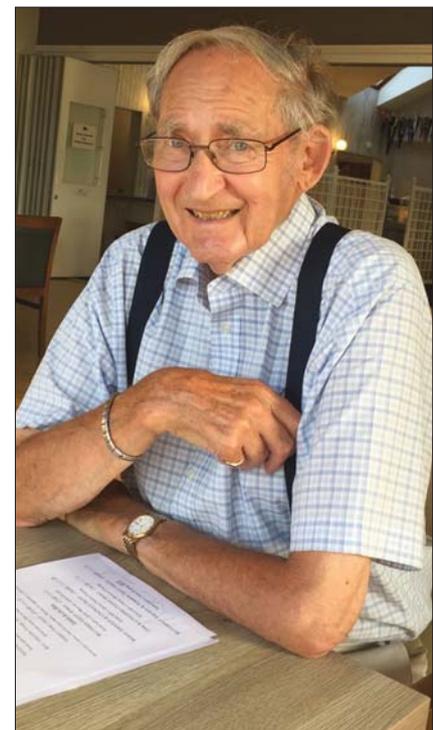
John Ascoli was born William John Newman but was always known as John, and he went on to change his family name to Ascoli when his mother married Hugh Ascoli. John's stepfather served in Coastal Forces in World War Two, commanded MTB 704, rose to the rank of Lieutenant Commander and was awarded the DSC. Hugh Ascoli was clearly a source of great inspiration to John.

John found a love of boating at a young age and this stayed with him throughout his life. When it came to his National Service in the early 1950's, he naturally volunteered for the Royal Navy and then pushed hard for service in Coastal Forces in order to follow in his stepfather's footsteps. He was appointed to HMS HORNET and then served in MTBs which he thoroughly enjoyed.

When he completed his two years and left the Navy, he discovered his other great passion, a love for the countryside. He went to agricultural college and then set his sights on a farming career. He went on to run a 100-acre farm with a dairy herd and pigs. By this time he had married and had children. To help support his family, he contributed regularly to Farmers Weekly and he found himself travelling all over the country to visit farms for stories and articles. He enjoyed his time with Farmers Weekly and this became his main career. Eventually, this came to an end when he retired. He returned to a life near the sea. He worked his way through a number of motor cruisers and became a leading light of the Chichester Yacht Club (In fact he went on to complete a successful spell as Commodore). John never forgot his Coastal Forces roots and joined the Coastal Forces Heritage Trust, first as a Trustee and then became the Chairman of Trustees. Typically, he gave his all to the trust, devoting his time, considerable administrative skills and a keen interest in naval history. Under his quiet but effective leadership, perception,



ABOVE *A very young Midshipman Ascoli*



RIGHT *John, in later years*

and determination, the Trust flourished. He was greatly respected, extremely knowledgeable and totally dedicated; it was all these qualities which brought the trust to realise its core aim, the creation of a Coastal Forces museum. The museum will open this summer; it is just such a shame that John is no longer here to see his great vision come to reality.

In the latter years of his life John had a range of medical conditions and was in and out of hospital. Typically, he faced all this with great fortitude, never bemoaning his lot and always looking forward with optimism.

He was a man whose glass was always half full. He is greatly missed by all who knew him, a real gentleman, a caring, considerate and generous man and the best possible ambassador in keeping the extraordinary story of Coastal Forces alive for present and future generations. I am so proud to have known him.

Rupert Head

GEOFFREY MILES HUDSON (1930-2020)

Geoffrey Hudson was one of founding members of the Coastal Forces Heritage Trust, serving as both a Trustee and the Trust Historian. His very deep knowledge of Coastal Forces history established him as the principle authority on this sphere of naval history. Not only was his knowledge, advice and guidance a great influence on the development of CFHT, he provided unstinting support to Coastal Forces veterans through the Coastal Forces Veterans Association. No author of books relating to Coastal Forces would proceed without consulting Geoffrey to confirm their historical data.



He was undoubtedly the principle contributor to the trilogy of Coastal Forces books written under the authorship of veteran Len Reynolds DSC. Geoffrey was a Yorkshireman, attending Leeds Grammar School between 1938 and 1946. The family's home, near Headingly Cricket Ground, suffered bomb damage from a 'near miss' in 1942. Geoffrey enjoyed serving in the school Air Cadet Force and was a 'marksman' with the Lee Enfield Rifle. On leaving school, he was articled to a firm of accountants in Leeds, subsequently, becoming a chartered accountant in 1952 and working as an auditor in Leeds until 1963. After employment as chief accountant with firms in Halifax and Bradford, Geoffrey became Finance Director of a printing company in Bradford in 1976 and of a machine manufacturing company in Manchester in 1980. He retired in 1991. He became a member of the Royal Institute of Naval Architects in the 1950s, after submitting two papers on warship hull design. Geoffrey's interest in Coastal Forces started at the age of 10 when he bought a small book on MTBs at Scarborough Railway Station for 1/-. In May 1941 he saw his first MTB – in the centre of Harrogate, over 60 miles from the sea! The boat was being transported on the back of a trailer.

Following the end of the War in 1945, Geoffrey started writing to the builders of CF craft, in an attempt to list, not only the boat numbers, but also the builder of each craft. There was no other way, as no books or articles listed anything, and even in 1946, some builders declined to confirm which boats they had built on the grounds that it was still 'secret.' Coastal Forces research took a back seat for a few years whilst Geoffrey studied for his accountancy exams. In 1952 he wrote to HMS Hornet with a number of queries. The CO wrote back, apologising that he had no officers available to answer Geoffrey's queries. Over a year later, a letter arrived out of the blue from Mike Benson, Senior Officer 1st FPB Squadron, explaining that he was coming ashore for six months and knew the answers to some of Geoffrey's questions. He travelled to Leeds later in the year to meet up and discuss a wide range of CF issues. This started a life-long friendship that lasted until Mike's death in the late 1970s. The ship's bell of Mike's old boat, MTB 5008, hung in Geoffrey's hall for over 50 years – and is one of several artifacts donated by Geoffrey to the new CF Museum.

Geoffrey was invited to become the Honorary Historian for the Coastal Forces Veterans' Association in 1988 – continuing until its disbandment in 2007. Sadly, he also had to resign as a Trustee of CFHT in 2011, due to domestic demands resulting from his wife Susan's illness. He nevertheless continued to advise the Trust and veterans in general on all aspects of Coastal Forces.

Although he never served in the armed forces, Geoffrey was invited aboard a number of CF boats; these visits included sea trips out in HM Ships GAY BOWMAN and DARK ANTAGONIST. In 1969 he had a day out aboard HMS BRAVE SWORDSMAN. (His final trip was in 1970, when HMS SCIMITER (the last boat based at HMS Vernon) sailed to Portland – where the FTBs were then based.

Two anecdotes highlight Geoffrey's early but comprehensive knowledge of naval matters. He is mentioned by name in the 1946 edition of Janes as a source of technical information – submitted when he was only 15 years old! In 1948 (aged 18) he wrote to his MP pointing out that the Civilian Lord of the Admiralty had made a major error whilst briefing Parliament on the current size of the Royal Navy. He received a formal reply admitting the error and confirming that the official record would be amended in line with the correct information Geoffrey had provided. In addition to his many other contributions to Coastal Forces, Geoffrey produced the historical A4 booklet for MTB 102. Between 1975 and 2015, Geoffrey would receive three or four phone calls every week from people with detailed queries about CF boats and their crews. With his unerring eye for detail and trenchant mind, he was able to answer almost all of these enquiries immediately without the need to refer to documentation. Geoffrey Hudson was a modest, private man who didn't relish public speaking. Nonetheless, he delivered several highly informative slide-show talks during CF reunion events in the 1990s.

He never published anything major under his own name. He had spent many years drafting a single reference work, that he called the 'Definitive guide to all Coastal Force boats'. It gives the build details and technical specification of every CF boat and it is hoped that this unique work can still be published. Geoffrey has left a number of items of historical interest to the new Coastal Forces Museum – including a flying fish mascot from the bridge of the first MTB.

Both the Coastal Forces Heritage Trust and the Coastal Forces Veterans Association benefited immensely from Geoffrey's association.

With grateful thanks to Geoffrey's son, Andrew, for this very fitting tribute

REPLICA CMB PROJECT UPDATE

We are grateful to David Griffiths, who is leading the new build of the CMB, for this update:

Most readers will be familiar with the imaginative and ambitious project to rebuild an accurate and faithful replica of a first series CMB in Boathouse 4 in Portsmouth Historic Dockyard. Lieutenant Augustus Agar's boat, CMB4, is also in Boathouse 4. The Trust has been following the build project progress with keen interest and it is appropriate to include an update in this last newsletter. We want to continue to engender interest and support and, of course, there is a great sense of naval history and poignancy here in Boathouse 4.

For much of 2020 work on the project had to be cut back due, of course, to the pandemic. Key members of the team had to self-isolate and/or furlough. However, a core dedicated workforce managed to still put in time to machine several thousand feet of khaya wood for the planking of the hull. The task of planking has moved forward impressively. At this time (April) 70% of the hull has been covered with diagonal, first layer of planking (Doing it this way saves on wood).

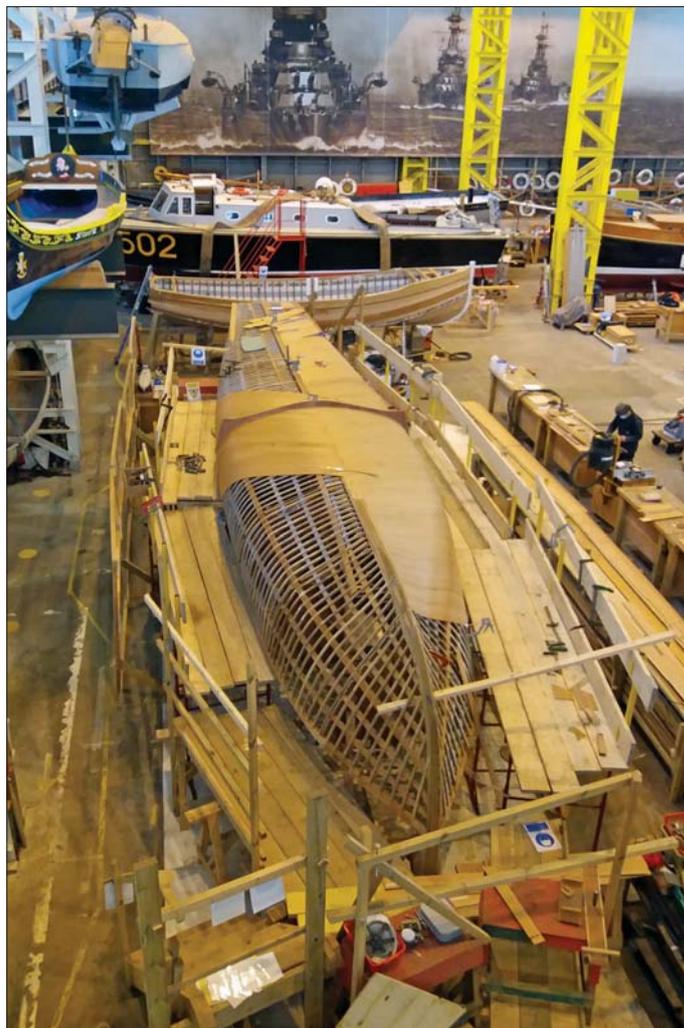
Concurrently there has been significant work in strengthening the hull around the cockpit, torpedo trough and forward hatch. The outer planking will be fitted longitudinally (as in the original boat) and, once the boat has been moved to a climate-controlled environment the whole boat will be epoxy sheathed and painted. Mechanical and electrical equipment will be fitted, together with the replica fixtures, fittings, cockpit instruments and armaments. It is hoped to launch the replica CMB replica in 2022.

She will become an historic naval icon and re-ignite an extraordinary piece of Royal Naval history which has been forgotten for far too long.

The Coastal Forces Heritage Trust website will carry regular updates on the project and ensure supporters and followers of Coastal Forces and the Trust are kept up to date on the project and, in particular, the new CMB4's launching and trials. No doubt public and media interest will be huge and the Trust will lend support to the project in whatever way it can.



Replica CMB being planked up (upside down, centre), (CMB4 is above and right) – March 2021



A month later (April)

IN MEMORIAM

WE SAY FAREWELL TO:

William Bell.....	410
Herbert Bray.....	1954
Joseph James (Jim) Burrow.....	101
Basil Harold Cole.....	3043
George Curtis	
Ronald Hobbs.....	245
Peter Kirk.....	277
Sharon Knapp	
Allan Lester-Jones	
William George Pemberton.....	2973
James Treadell.....	1942
William P Wild.....	2057

WE WILL REMEMBER THEM



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Registered Address:

Coastal Forces Heritage Trust
c/o The National Museum of the Royal Navy
HM Naval Base (PP66)
Portsmouth
Hampshire PO1 3NH

Director: 07506 596109

Fax: 023 9272 7575

email: directorcoastalforces@outlook.com

website: www.coastal-forces.org.uk

Newsletter Editor: 07738473584/01243 582005

Email: rhead.artist@btinternet.com

Patron: Admiral Sir Mark Stanhope GCB, OBE, ADC, DL

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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.



or if you wish to make a single payment, please complete the box(es) below:

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