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# NEWSLETTER

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*As this newsletter goes to print we are at week 4 of “lockdown”. Nobody can second-guess where we will be in one month’s time or, indeed, 12 months’ time. The only certainty is that we will come through this but that life will be different in many ways afterwards.*

*The charitable sector has taken a severe hit. Looking at our own trust, it is impossible to speculate how the core project, the new museum, will be effected. I can only promise to keep you posted and assure everyone that we will not allow ourselves to be blown off course.*

*This newsletter, and the 25 which have preceded it, have recounted the tenacity, bravery and daring of men and women of Coastal Forces who have stepped up to serve their country of times of greatest peril. We are all, like millions across the world, in an unprecedented crisis, perhaps the greatest in our peace time history. I feel sure that all the Trustees would wish me to pass on their good wishes to all our readership and supporters, would ask us to stick to HMG advice, stay at home, take care of ourselves and of those around us. We are acutely aware of the importance of communications; our hope is that this newsletter will provide a glimmer of assurance that, even these stressful and difficult times of isolation, you remain part of the Coastal Forces “family”.*

HMS ARCHER is shown here as a salute to an impressive record of 35 years of Royal Naval service. She was the lead ship of this large class of 16 vessels. HMS ARCHER was completed in 1985 by Watercraft Marine, the original shipbuilders (Most of the remaining vessels were completed or built by Vosper Thornycroft). They make up the First Patrol Boat Squadron (IPBS) and are the closest the Royal Navy has now to Coastal Forces.

In the main, they have been attached to the prominent universities. They continue to provide invaluable service in providing essential training and sea time to potential young officers. Additionally, the IPBS vessels continue to provide an invaluable “shop-window” for the Royal Navy. The CO of HMS RANGER, Lieutenant Thomas Slight, has provided an interesting report of the recent visit to the Pool of London (see pages 6-8). This visit to the capital was clearly both high profile and very successful. It is also worth mentioning that some of the class have been given light weapons (and several could be fitted with a 20 mm gun) and have been deployed to operational roles in Cyprus, Gibraltar and on the Clyde.

Moving on, I am always conscious that the success of this newsletter depends very much on contributions from the readership and supporters; it is something of a team effort. Inputs usually include personal wartime recollections, news of the remaining historic boats, reports from the First Patrol Boat Squadron, a look back on the lives of notable Coastal Forces persons and factual articles on boats and weapons. A mixed



HMS ARCHER – First of Class

bag but I want to go on record with thanks and appreciation for all past contributions. Please keep them coming.

Of course, first-hand accounts of war-time service and conflict carry the most impact. We are fortunate to have in this newsletter vivid recollections and impressive recall of Tom Chapman who, serving in his first boat, MGB 603, aged 19, found himself in one of the biggest and longest surface actions against a multitude of E-Boats off Smiths Knoll in the North Sea over 24<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> October 1943. The battle is told on page 8 and is brought to life with Tony's personal memories.

We have an informative and interesting piece on the restoration of Rescue Motor Launch 497 by Clare Hunt, Curator, National Museum of the Royal Navy. The boat is now in Hartlepool and being restored for visitors to see, close-up, one

of the last remaining Fairmile B motor launches. Altogether some 650 were built in UK and around the world. Some became rescue launches. RML 497 was one of these. RML's were often sent out in adverse conditions to pluck airmen from the sea close to enemy shores.

We have a poignant poem by an unknown WRNS officer which expresses the emotions of the base support staff witnessing the boats departing on a night offensive and awaiting their return the next morning. We have found an impressive painting by the renowned marine artist David Cobb to accompany this poem.

There is more; read on, enjoy.

Commander Rupert Head, Royal Navy – Editor

## CHAIRMAN'S LETTER

At times I have wondered whether we would ever see the day that work would begin in renovating our museum building at Priddy's Hard. Happily, that day arrived in late January and now scaffolding is up and men in hard hats look busy! It's a good start but by no means the end of our challenges. To borrow from Churchill, perhaps it is "the end of the beginning"

A full report is elsewhere in this newsletter but the headline timetable is to complete the building renovation by mid-summer, hand the building to the NMRN who will then bring the boats down from Yeovilton and renovate them for display and after that commence the Exhibition fit out. Rather than attempt an opening just as the visitor season ends we will wait until Spring 2021 to open to the public. I know the Editor will ensure you are kept fully in the picture in the run-up to the opening.

The opening of the Museum will be the culmination of many years of dedicated work by the CFHT and its supporters and the indispensable participation and help of our two partners, the National Museum of the Royal Navy and the Portsmouth Naval Base Property Trust. I am grateful to everybody who has helped get us to where we are today – with a few more months of effort, and of course, a bit more money we will get this project over the finish line!

With the finish line coming into view, Trustees are beginning to consider the future of the CFHT. Change is inevitable but how the Trust evolves in the future is very much work in progress. I will let you know when we have a clearer idea of the direction of travel.

Vice Admiral Sir Paul Haddacks, KCB, Chairman

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and how the history and stories will be told, but the detailed design work has been contracted out to a specialist company which has an impressive track record of imaginative, exciting state of the art presentation. Audio and visual displays will be key ingredients and there will be “hands-on” attractions too. At the end of the day, we want visitors to come away better informed, certainly, but also inspired, wanting to come back or recommend the attraction to others.

There will be a further update, certainly, in the next newsletter but in the meantime, readers might like to see how the Portsmouth News has given 100% support behind the project; this is, of course, excellent PR. No way back after this...



*Work started on building P*

## BOATS ROUND-UP AND NEWS

### CMB 4 RE-BUILD UPDATE

We are pleased to report that the CMB4 build project continues steadily, carefully and to the highest standards of craftsmanship and boatbuilding. Here is a short overview of the work achieved during just one month (February 2020)

*During February the teams have focussed on manufacturing and fitting the internal ring frames and the fore-deck hanging frames. These are now in the main complete and have been dry*



*fitted ready for final nailing once the planking has been overlaid those locations. The engine bearer ‘U’ frames have also been dry fitted to the same stage. During the period the stem and fore-foot chock rebates have been completed and some dummy planks laid in place. The first real plank was dry fitted to the hog and pending final fairing this will be glued and nailed in place over the coming two months along with some of the other planks as they progress. Over the coming months the full circumference ring frames and hanging deck frames will be fully nailed in place as the planking progresses. The foredeck hatch reinforcement infills will be finished along with the cockpit reinforcement section.*

This photograph looking down onto the upturned hull shows the first of the planking going into place each side of the keel. The picture shows the lightness but complexity of construction and the degree of skill required to steam bend and fit the very large number of ribs.

### MTB 102 GOES INTO REFIT

This photograph was taken on 9 March 2020. MTB 102 is at last out of the water and ready for her essential refit. This was much later than had been planned and the next few months are going to be frenetic. But the small, dedicated MTB 102 team are determined to get 102 ready for all important Dunkirk 80 commemorations.



## RML 497 AT THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE ROYAL NAVY HARTLEPOOL

Though lacking the glamour and speed of some of their Coastal Forces contemporaries, the Fairmile B motor launches were built to travel long distances and face the roughest of seas. In the air sea role, the Rescue Motor Launches (RMLs) saved thousands of lives.

Back in 2015, the National Museum of the Royal Navy was offered an important and rare opportunity to purchase one of the very few remaining RMLs. Built in 1942 and serving from a range of bases throughout the War, RML 497 had just retired from her second major role as a ferry in the West Country. Fortunately, she had been owned by a ferry company which had been keen to maintain as many of her original wartime features as possible.

It took a few years to organise and raise the funds to move RML 497 from Southampton, where she had been berthed, to the Hartlepool site of The National Museum of the Royal Navy. Previously, the only resident ship here was HMS *Trincornalee*, a 202 year old Royal Navy frigate, so it has been an exciting development for the site, as well as a great conservation challenge.

In January 2019 RML 497 took refuge under a newly built shelter in the carpark, no doubt very pleased to be out of the water, having been afloat about 74 years longer than ever intended - we must not forget that these relatively fragile wooden boats were built for the war and that the Royal Navy had no use for them in peace time. Those that got a second life as ferries lasted longer than the ones that became houseboats, many of which have now been abandoned; expensive projects which had obviously seemed like a nice idea at the time!

Ten months later and RML seems quite comfortable in her new home, despite a few cracks appearing as she dries out; this will clearly take a couple of years as the progress is necessarily very slow. We have been monitoring moisture levels with a digital meter which tells us that she loses about 1% of moisture each month. A gentle drying out process is much preferable for the timber, but the boat will receive regular treatments of a Borocol spray throughout her interior which will kill off the mould and fungus which would normally thrive in a damp environment. A Conservation Management Plan, kindly funded by the Coastal Forces Heritage Trust, is also well under way which will outline the vessel's history and significant components as well as her key conservation and maintenance needs for the future. The boat retains evidence of its wartime history both inside and out, but there are still conservation problem areas and we need to decide how to deal with these in both the short and long term.

The hulls of the Fairmile B motor launches were made of mahogany laid in 'double diagonal'; two layers sandwiched together and laid in different directions for greater strength. The first job to do when RML 497 arrived in Hartlepool was to clean her hull before the various marine growths such as barnacles dried up and set hard like concrete. She also had a lot of mussels attached



*In Portsmouth shortly after purchase, 2016*



*Cleaning the hull*

to the hull which, by the time we got to them, were not smelling pleasant! We recruited a band of volunteers to help with this rather unpleasant job but they seemed to enjoy themselves and after a few months the hull was cleared of sea creatures and slimy mud. A key reason why RML 497 was taken out of the water was the state of the keel. It was broken and had been attacked by gribble, a type of sea creature which burrows into the wood. From now on, the boat will remain on dry land – to get her floating again would require the removal of too much historical material and further very radical and extensive re-build of the hull.

The propellers and rudders of RML 497 are original and made of bronze so need a different type of cleaning – scraping alone will not remove the marine encrustations which have formed so we plan to use hydrochloric acid to gradually dissolve them. Obviously, acids have to be applied very carefully.

On the upper deck there are other issues: the wheelhouse is largely original but at some point was clad with poor quality plywood which has deteriorated badly – this will eventually need replacing. Another, rather unusual, problem that we have dealt with is the growth of grass and even small shrubs on the top deck! These have had to be removed because their roots would grow through the gaps and force the timbers apart if they got too big.

A lovely find in the wheelhouse was the flag locker: not only does the locker itself appear to be original, but so do most of the 30 or so flags that were still inside. We can tell their age



*The flag locker, complete with original flags*

by the fact that they are made from wool, rather than synthetic materials. Years of wear and tear have taken their toll but add to the evidence that these are indeed wartime survivors.

Inside the boat there is more evidence of wartime history. The main spaces inside RML 497 are:

- the forward mess, where most of the crew ate and slept
- the lobby area, which contained a small galley and the wireless room
- the engine room
- the wardroom

The forward mess contains a nice original survivor in the form of a watertight bulkhead door that leads to the lobby area of the boat; this door is featured on the original plans for these vessels.

The engine room still contains two huge Gardner diesel engines – these are of some age but not of wartime date (petrol engines were used then). However, there are pieces of built-in furniture and other mechanical elements that certainly do date back to the 40s.

Along with the boat herself, here at The National Museum in Hartlepool we have also been lucky enough to receive personal accounts and photographs from two men who served on RMLs 497 and 499. A memoir from Les Parkinson, the Motor Mechanic of RML 497, takes us from his training (he was a policeman, not a mechanic!) to the other side of the War when he helped take the boat down to Dartmouth, at that point having no idea where she would end up.

A series of photographs was very recently received from the son of Sick Berth Attendant, John Derrick, which paint a wonderfully detailed picture of life at sea on RML 499, including the dubious pastime of fishing using depth charges. Both men died in the 1990s, but I am sure that they would have been amused to see the fascination and delight that we have gained from the combination of their two accounts. Of special interest to me was the images of the interior of the sick berth of RML 499. I had never seen images of this space before, and bearing in the mind the special purpose of these vessels, it is going to be very important to represent this space



*Another original feature in the forward mess that we all recognise*



ABOVE AND BELOW *John Derrick* SBA and the interior of the sick berth of RML 499



accurately in whatever interpretation route we choose.

RML 497 is a major part of The National Museum of the Royal Navy Hartlepool's development plans. There is an awful lot of work to do on the vessel first, but a new building to house it, along with museum displays relating to the 20th and 21st century Royal Navy is the ultimate goal. Watch this space!

[www.nmrn.org.uk/hartlepool](http://www.nmrn.org.uk/hartlepool)

Clare Hunt, Curator

### **FROM HMS RANGER OF THE FIRST PATROL BOAT SQUADRON – OPERATION ENDURING CHRISTMAS**

Early this year HMS RANGER (P293) took advantage of a rare gap in tasking to conduct a two week defence engagement visit to the capital. The visit would provide an opportunity to build closer ties with the ships affiliated organisations, provide support to the Naval Regional Command as well as creating an excellent training opportunity for the embarked students of Sussex University Royal Naval Squadron.



*Departing St Katharine Dock*

As many will remember, the start of the year saw a relentless wave of storms hit the south coast. The weekend before RANGER's departure was therefore spent carefully monitoring the inbound storm Brendan in the hope of finding a gap in the weather. With a small window identified, the ship departed Portsmouth in the early hours of the 13<sup>th</sup> January and the following 10 hours were spent transiting at maximum speed with the worst of storm Brendan nipping at their heels. Thankfully as they passed the planned back up harbours and shelter areas they managed to stay ahead of the weather and, on arriving into Ramsgate harbour, they had enough time to fuel and proceed to their berth for the night before the 70+ knots winds arrived to provide a bumpy night to all on board.

However, with the Thames Estuary now providing some protection from the worst of the storm, RANGER could concentrate on her engagement programme. On finally arriving in the Pool of London the following evening the crew were put straight to work conducting a presentation to the local reserve unit and hosting a ships tour and career discussion. This busy tempo set the tone for the visit and the following day saw the RANGER back on the river early with representatives of the Yeoman Warders and members of London based army units who were introduced to the nuances of life at sea. A brief pit stop over lunch allowed the embarkation of civilian employers of Royal Naval Reservists who were given an insight into the vital role Reservists play in delivering front line operations and how they in turn can benefit from training and leadership experience gained by their employees. The day culminated in a brief trip up river, proceeding under Tower Bridge and passing HMS Belfast and the Tower of London with plenty of interest from the tourists along the embarkment.

This pattern was repeated for the following few days with 2 trips a day running from HMS PRESIDENT, the Naval base located in the shadow of the Tower Bridge. Guests at sea



*In the Pool of London against a famous landmark*



*Sporting the new traditional rig of roll neck sweaters*

included the Colonel and senior staff of 256 Field Hospital, who used Ranger as a platform to conduct their monthly Brigade level Video Teleconference, as well as members of the Armed Forces Parliamentary Scheme who were given an introductory insight into the workings of the Royal Navy. With the Ship requiring some routine maintenance she was taken off the river with St Kathrines Dock kindly offering the use of their facilities. Having just squeezed into their lock at high water, HMS RANGER spent the weekend as pride of place taking the berth normally held by the Royal Barge. This brief respite from the wind and congestion on the river also allowed the Ships Company to invite back their guests from the week to a short reception and capability demonstration where they could take a closer look at the Ship and her capabilities.

Unfortunately, Storm Brendan was still raging off the west coast and HMS BITER, which had been due to relieve RANGER

was weathered in at Holyhead by 7-metre seas. RANGER was therefore asked to provide a further day of tasking which required a slightly earlier departure from her sheltered berth. Following this final day of engagement, and with storm Brendan finally breaking, the decision was made to make speed for Portsmouth and another early departure was conducted, this time from the ship's temporary home at PRESIDENT. A thankfully calmer and more comfortable return journey followed where the embarked students could make use of the slightly quieter programme to put the lessons delivered up river to test in open water. As the ship approached Portsmouth another member of the RNs patrol force was outbound, her larger cousin the River Class HMS TYNE. A slight diversion from the planned approach to harbour allowed HMS RANGER to pay her respects to the senior ship, conducting a ceremonial sail past, before continuing her journey home.

## THE BATTLE OF SMITH'S KNOLL

One of the longest and most intense Second World War engagements between Coastal Forces and the formidable German E-boats took place in the North Sea off East Anglia on the night 24<sup>th</sup>/25<sup>th</sup> October 1943. This became known as the Battle of Smith's Knoll <sup>1</sup>. We are fortunate to have a first-hand account of this battle. Tony Chapman was a telegraphist in one of the 'Dog' boats which was in the thick of it; Tony has written a book <sup>2</sup> on his war experiences; he has vivid memories of this night.

Before relating the story of this action, a few words about Tony Chapman. Tony was born in Southampton in 1924. Aged 16 he watched with horror as the historic High Street of Southampton burnt to the ground in a firestorm caused by a heavy German bombing raid on the night of 30 November 1940. He was a young messenger for the ARP and received a commendation for his bravery that night when he was given vital messages to deliver and had to find his way past burning buildings and further high explosives and incendiaries falling all around him. He vowed to join up to, in his words, 'fight back'. He joined the Navy. After condensed and intensive training to become a telegraphist, he joined Coastal Forces and was drafted to MGB 607<sup>3</sup>, a "Dog" boat based at HMS MIDGE at Great Yarmouth. 607 was commanded by Lieutenant Mike Marshall, DSC, RNVR,

one of the most successful Coastal Forces commanding officers.

On 24<sup>th</sup> October more than 30 E-boats left their bases along the Dutch coast. They were concentrated for a mission to attack a northbound convoy off Norfolk. The E-boats were spotted and reported by RAF bombers returning to UK from a mission over Germany. The convoy, which was escorted by some five destroyers, plus minesweepers ahead and motor launches ahead and astern of the convoy, was alerted. The Area Commander for the east coast bases was also alerted. All available and operational Coastal Forces units were made ready and sailed to intercept the enemy. Four Dog boats and a number of motor launches were deployed and took station to ambush the enemy on their return to their bases. The stage was set for a major engagement.

The convoy was about 2 hours ahead of schedule and most of the E-boats arrived at their intended interception point too late but there was a fierce engagement with the destroyers which had peeled off from the convoy. HMS WORCESTER opened fire on 4 E-boats and sank one of them. HMS PYTCHLEY detected 6 boats by radar and damaged at least one. A third escort, HMS MACKAY, took part in a wild action, engaged both with guns and depth charges on shallow settings. There are no records of the E-boats firing their torpedoes but, with



*Tony Chapman in 1942*





*MGB 607*

very close range action and drastic manoeuvring, there was probably no opportunity to line up for any torpedo attacks.

Returning to Tony Chapman in 607, this boat and another Dog Boat, 603, both designed as 'Unit Y', were lying in wait, with engines idling quietly. The E-boats were detected by hydrophone. These were part of the Fourth Flotilla based at IJmuiden and included the leader, S88 commanded by Korvetten Kapitan Lutzo, and S63. Both had already suffered damage from earlier encounters with the destroyers. A very close quarters battle ensued. One of E-boats turned at full helm towards 607 but the latter was able to put the helm over at the last moment and ram the E-boat on her starboard side. Sustained exchanges of gunfire continued at point blank range.

As one of two telegraphists, Tony Chapman's action station was in the RT room below the bridge. He remembers the chaos and deafening noises, particularly the gunfire and the screeching of tearing wood and metal. There was a second telegraphist alongside him who left his station to see what was going on and was killed seconds later.

607 managed to disengage. She had lost much of her bow but there was the satisfaction of having inflicted a mortal blow to the E-boat which was then on fire. Research and recent access to German records indicated that this boat was S63 and that she subsequently sank, along with S88, as a result of this phase of the battle.

607 had half of her crew killed or wounded. 603 closed to assist but 6 more E-boats were detected and concentrated their fire on 603. There was a further running battle but 603 was able to draw the E-boats away from the crippled 607 and put down a smoke screen. 603 was able to return to 607 and started



*S-63 Leaving her base in Holland*

a marathon tow back to Great Yarmouth. The CO of 603, Lieutenant Roger Lightoller showed exceptional seamanship and for this and the successful night actions was awarded the DSC. In fact, there had been separate encounters during the night against the greatest concentration of E-boats seen in the war up until that date.

#### Notes:

- 1 Smith's Knoll is a sand and mud bank about 10 miles off the Norfolk coast.
- 2 *The War of the Motor Gun Boats: One Man's Personal War at Sea with the Coastal Forces* by A J Chapman. Available through Amazon Books (ISBN: 9781783462247)
- 3 607 was initially classed as a MGB (motor gun boat) but from 1943 all MGBs were re-designated as MTBs.

## THREE MTBS BY DAVID COBB AND A POIGNANT POEM

This painting by David Cobb, a Past President of the Royal Society of Marine Artists, has hung in the Anteroom, Officers' Mess, Fort Blockhouse (formally HMS DOLPHIN) since 1996. It compliments perfectly the poignant poem below which was written in 1943 by an unknown WRNS officer as a tribute to the 23<sup>rd</sup> Flotilla. There is a brass plaque below the painting to say it was presented by the MTB and MGB Officers Association to HMS DOLPHIN, but why it was presented and by who? If anyone can throw light on this, we would be delighted to hear more. *Editor*

### *And Never Know Who Will Come Back*

*This is the gold enchanted hour*

*The evening, when syringas flower*

*The castle dark against the sea*

*Is woven from a fantasy*

*The hills round us, cool and green*

*The quiet river flows between,*

*More quiet than breathing, wise as tears*

*A haven loved of mariners*

*In this strange hour of moon and sun*

*The boats are passing 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*



*With morning's splendour*

*We will hear the throb of engines*

*Faint but clear and see the threads of foam advance*

*The MTBs come back from France*

*And we will search the mist to trace*

*If each is in her wanted place*

*Knowing the boys, red eyed and worn,*

*Have braced their courage with the dawn*

*To bring them in with throttle loud,*

*And pennants streaming, game and proud.*

*In other gold enchanted hours,*

*An evening when Syringa flowers*

*In the unremembering years to be*

*One by one and silently*

*The little ghosts will go to sea*

## THE STEAM GUNBOATS – IN A CLASS OF THEIR OWN

Seven steam gun boats were built between 1941 and 1942 for Coastal Forces. These vessels had little in common with other Coastal Forces units. They were considerably larger and heavier gunned than a Fairmile D 'Dog' boat, much slower than an MTB or MGB and substantially smaller than

a destroyer, frigate or corvette. In short, they were "neither fish nor fowl".

The SGBs were conceived to meet the need for a warship which was large enough to put to sea in rough weather and which could operate both as a 'super-gunboat' and a torpedo



*HMS Grey Goose*

carrier, and combine the functions of the MGB and MTB. Furthermore, they were designed to be a match for the formidable German E-boat. The lead architect was John Holt of the Royal Corps of Naval Constructors. His final design resembled a miniature destroyer but it transpired that the comparatively large SGB silhouette was a drawback, making them too easy a target.

Sixty were planned but only an initial batch of nine were ordered, and, in fact, only seven were completed (Two units were ordered from Thornycroft but were never begun due to enemy bombing). The further 51 vessels were never ordered.

They were 145 feet long and, as built, had a displacement of 172 tons and were powered by two 4,000 hp steam turbines. vulnerable to fairly small calibre in-coming fire and then required a major effort to repair. Furthermore, fuel consumption was heavy with the added disadvantage that, while an MTB could start from cold and get away immediately, the SGB had to build up steam. Over time, extra protective steel plate was added to the sides of the boiler and engine rooms, together with the extra armament and crew, but these modifications increased the displacement to 260 tons and maximum speed was consequentially reduced from 35 knots to 30 knots.

The SGB's were the veritable "battleships of the coastal forces". In addition to the torpedoes, armament consisted of a three-inch gun on the quarter deck, a pair of 6-pounder guns fore and aft, and two Oerlikon 20mm cannons, one in the bows right over the stem, and one in the stern firing over the 3-inch gun. Finally, machine guns were fitted in twin mounts on either side of the bridge. The 1st SGB Flotilla was formed at Portsmouth in June 1942 under the command of Lieutenant Commander Peter Scott DSC (son of the Antarctic explorer Captain Robert Scott, later a noted conservationist and broadcaster). Their first fleet action took place in the Baie de Seine (the estuary of the Seine River) shortly after midnight on 19 June, when two vessels – SGB 7 and 8, under the joint command of Lieutenant J. D. Ritchie, in company with the Hunt-class destroyer HMS *Albrighton*, encountered several E-boats escorting two German merchantmen. SGB 7 was sunk in this action; as a consequence the Admiralty noted their vulnerability and refitted them with the additional armour over their engine and boiler rooms.

The nearest *Kriegsmarine* parallel to the SGBs was the German R-301 class of R-boats. Although these German 160-ton vessels were designed as minesweepers/minelayers, the R-boats were equipped with two torpedo tubes and an 88mm gun, as well as the typical R boat armament of 37mm and 20mm guns and



*HMS Grey Fox*

16 mines. In the various encounters between the SGBs and the R-boats, the SGBs usually came out on top.

The surviving 6 steam gunboats went on to give sterling service, particularly in the long struggle for maritime ascendancy and control of the Channel and in the run-up to D-Day. By 1944, the Germans had developed a new type of ground mine code-named “Oyster”; it was activated by pressure, magnetic or acoustic signature. In November 1944 the SGBs were converted under great secrecy into fast minesweepers. All armament was taken off and a large structure added midships to house diesel engines to generate high voltage sweeps. Minesweeping operations were successful and the

steel hulls and machinery stood up well to mine detonations, sometimes up to 8 sympathetic detonations at one time.

The steam gunboats were somewhat forgotten after the war but, notwithstanding their relative slow speed and vulnerability, they played an important role in the Channel theatre of war. The “Grey Boats” were remembered with affection and respected by those who served in them – at least they were (eventually and after much arguments with the Admiralty Names Committee) given their own names!

For the record, the 7 vessels which entered service were:

Number and Name	Builder	Laid down	Launched	In Service	Out of service/Fate
SGB 3 <i>Grey Seal</i>	Yarrow, Scotstoun	Jan 41	Aug 41	Feb 42	1949 Sold
SGB 4 <i>Grey Fox</i>	Yarrow, Scotstoun	Jan 41	Sep 41	Mar 42	1947 Sold
SGB 5 <i>Grey Owl</i>	Hawthorn Leslie	Apr 41	Aug 41	Apr 42	1949 Scrapped
SGB 6 <i>Grey Shark</i>	Hawthorn Leslie	Mar 41	Nov 41	Apr 42	1947 Sold. Became houseboat
SGB 7 (Sank before the class were given names)	Denny, Dunbarton	Feb 41	Sep 41	Mar 42	Sunk by gunfire from German surface vessels in the Seine Estuary June 1942
SGB 8 <i>Grey Wolf</i>	Denny, Dunbarton	Feb 41	Nov 41	Apr 42	1948 Sold
SGB 9 <i>Grey Goose</i>	J Samuel White, Cowes	Jan 41	Feb 42	Jul 42	1957 Sold. Became houseboat

## WAR IN THE PACIFIC – JAPAN’S FINAL ANSWER

Towards the end of the Pacific War, the Japanese Imperial Command was increasingly anticipating an American ultimate invasion of mainland Japan. Preparation was made for one last supreme and desperate battle to save the homeland. The US Navy had conclusively defeated the Japanese Navy in major engagements across the Pacific and a huge invasion fleet had been assembled. Japanese supreme command looked away from conventional forces to other forms of warfare to stem the tide of US dominance. (The Japanese were, of course, totally unaware of the nuclear bomb). Suicide attack, the much feared *Kamikaze* aircraft, was already an accepted method of fighting and had achieved some significant successes against the US carrier fleets (The *Kamikaze* philosophy is largely attributed to Japan’s highly militaristic pre-war society as demonstrated by the *samurai* system which honours and idealizes self-sacrifice.)

The Imperial Japanese Forces had never acquired the experience or assets to form significant maritime coastal forces but, very late in the war and having seen the extensiveness effectiveness of small, fast attack craft – the American PT boats, in particular – they put together a plan to build a vast number of *Shinyo*, or suicide attack boats, the marine equivalents of the *Kamikaze*. (The Imperial Japanese Army had about 3,000 similar small boats called *Maru-ni* which were used to drop depth charges alongside enemy shipping in coastal waters)

All Japanese boatyards, down to the smallest fishing boat builders, were ordered to construct small, very basic wooden *Shinyo* craft in a matter of weeks. They were generally between 16 to 18 feet in length, powered by converted lorry or car engines with four for’ard gears (no reverse), giving the boats a top speed of 30 knots and a simple steering mechanism for the single crewman. Before deploying to the operational theatres, often as deck cargo, the boats would be packed with about 400 lbs of explosive, or sometimes two depth charges.

It has been estimated that around 6,000 boats were produced. Many were shipped, together with their crews, to Okinawa, to counter the huge US invasion forces. A further number, possibly as many as 100, found their way to Hong Kong, but the vast majority were held in Japan ready for the expected invasion.

The coxswains would have received only the very basic training. They would have been taught how to steer the boat, take avoiding action under fire, get their boat to the largest target in front of them and arm the explosive device at the last moment. It is believed that there were no shortages of volunteers for *Shinyo* missions and there are accounts that the majority were fanatical 17-year old students who chose to give their lives to the patriotic cause. They were plucked mostly from high schools.

The Okinawa boats were hidden in inlets and coves around the coastline, but fortunately American intelligence and air surveillance were able to pinpoint most of the locations and these were intensely targeted, either from the air or by PT boats. It is believed that a mass Japanese attack on the concentration of



*A Shinyo Boat in Japan's War Museum*



*A Shinyo Boat captured in 1945*

capital US ships offshore making up the US invasion fleet was prevented at the last moment. It is impossible to say what would have happened had a co-ordinated, large-scale attack taken place but one British admiral commanding a group of carriers in the Pacific said that if these small, fast, low profile *Shinyo* boats had got in amongst the fleet they would have been difficult to spot, target and destroy. Undoubtedly some would have got through.

The boats which came to Hong Kong were hidden up in caves and undergrowth on Lama Island.

The imperial Japanese Army in Hong Kong surrendered to the Royal Navy when Japan surrendered on 30 August 1945 and the surrender document for Hong Kong was signed 16 days later. There is some historical evidence that *Shinyo* boats were manned and launched to carry out one last gesture of defiance. Three boats were seen heading towards Man-o'-War Anchorage where two British aircraft carriers were anchored. The attack was thwarted by aircraft of the Fleet Air Arm; one of the boats was sunk, one ran aground and the other fled. The locations of the other boats were found shortly after and numbers of Japanese taken into custody.

In terms of war resources, the 6000 or so *Shinyo* boats cost Japan very little and it seems there were no shortages of volunteers to man them. Had this extraordinary fanatical force been put together and deployed, say, 6 months earlier the history of the Naval War in the Pacific might have turned out very differently.

## LIVES IN BRIEF

### VICE ADMIRAL SIR DONALD GOSLING, KCVO

It is unusual to include a special tribute to the life of someone who never served in Coastal Forces but we make an exception for the Late Vice Admiral Sir Donald Gosling who died on 16 September 2019. Sir Donald was a long-time advocate, supporter and benefactor of the Royal Navy and, indeed, the National Museum of Royal Navy. Although it is more than 70 years since he left the Senior Service, he never forgot the grounding and opportunities the Royal Navy gave him. He joined the Royal Navy in 1944 and served in the cruiser HMS *Leander* in the Mediterranean. This left a lasting impression on him (Both his house and his yacht were named after the warship.)

After the war, he teamed up with fellow ex-serviceman Ronald Hobson to buy a bombsite in London and turn it into a car park. Over the next 50 years, this venture grew into National Car Parks, covering 650 sites. He was, by any measure, very successful but his



*Sir Donald Gosling (as a Rear Admiral)*

generosity improved the lives of Naval personnel and their families at sea and on land, from helping with commissioning ceremonies and providing mess deck facilities, to paying for adventurous training opportunities around the world.

Sir Donald's support for the Royal Navy was recognised with a series of honorary ranks, from Captain through to his appointment as Vice Admiral in 2015 (The photograph here shows him as a Rear Admiral). He also held the post of Vice Admiral of the United Kingdom, subordinate only to the Lord High Admiral of the United Kingdom, the Duke of Edinburgh.

First Sea Lord, Admiral Tony Radakin, said "I am enormously saddened by Sir Don's death. He was a close and warm friend to the Naval Service throughout his life, and there has been a tremendous outpouring of affection, gratitude and collective sorrow from across the Service.

"He shared our values; he laughed with us; and his humanity and generosity touched every single one of us. He will be sorely missed."

Sir Donald was generous to the Coastal Forces Heritage Trust and took fully supported our aims, just as he was passionate about all aspects of the Royal Navy's history, supporting Naval documentary makers, serving as a trustee of the Fleet Air Arm Museum and, in 2012, donating £25m to help preserve HMS *Victory*. Indeed, his support of the National Museum of the Royal Navy over the past decade has assisted with the ongoing transformation of the UK's four principal naval museums, and helped to push the historic dockyard alone to the cusp of one million visitors every year. It is fitting that a gallery in the Portsmouth museum bears his name. "We are incredibly grateful for Sir Donald Gosling's support of the National Museum over the years," said Dr Caroline Williams, acting chairman of the NMRN's Board. "His amazingly generous support of HMS *Victory* was a game changer for the museum."

## IN MEMORIAM

### WE SAY FAREWELL TO:

W Ades	CFVA 3303	Norman (Bob) Knight	CFVA 2962
F Anthony	CFVA 1544	Leslie (Dodger) Long	CFVA187
Lt Cdr C Coles, OBE, VRD, RNR		Cdr A H Lorimer, OBE, RN	
Ken Cook	CFVA 3039	Isabella Oakton (nee McCubbin)	CFVA 2859
John Glover	CFVA 3358	Frank West	CFVA 891

## WE WILL REMEMBER THEM

# FOR THE DIARY

The Service of Remembrance at Hornet on Sunday 8 November 2020



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