



Ordinary People Doing Extraordinary Things

The average age of Coastal Forces crews in both world wars was 21. The vast majority were fresh out of school, with a small number of more experienced Senior Ratings and older volunteers amongst the officers. They came from all walks of life and due to the exigencies of wartime, arrived onboard with minimal training. They grew up very quickly...

Here are some pen-pictures to give you a flavour. We hope they will inspire people of all ages – poignant reminders of how ordinary human beings can respond to extraordinary pressure.



Lieutenant Commander Robert Peverell Hitchens DSO* DSC RNVR** or 'Hitch' as he was known to his colleagues, was a Falmouth-based solicitor with a keen interest in sailing and motor racing who had joined the RNVR in 1936.

At Dunkirk he was closely involved with the small boats and yachts evacuating troops from the jetty, where he won his first DSC. He joined Coastal Forces in 1940 and led the way for RNVR officers in that field. By late 1941 he was a Flotilla Commander, gaining a bar to his DSC for the capture of an E boat in November of that year. His first DSO came in April 1941 following an engagement with six E Boats off Ostend.

In July of that year he won a bar to his DSO for a successful attack on a convoy of trawlers protecting an oil tanker. In the autumn of 1942 he was awarded a second bar to his DSC for action against a convoy off the Hook of Holland. A few weeks later his ship was lost to enemy fire, but he survived.

In February 1943 he was recommended for the Victoria Cross following an action in which he put his ship alongside a stricken MGB that was on fire in order to rescue the crew. Both ships caught fire and the men were lucky to survive. Hitchens felt that he should not be awarded this medal because he had endangered two of the boats trying to rescue his friends, and the nomination was parked. On 12 April 1943, whilst successfully engaging German minelayers off the Belgian coast, his ship was hit and he was killed outright. He received his second 'mentioned in despatches' posthumously for this action.



William Savage worked in the brewery at Smethwick, Staffordshire. He joined the Navy in December 1939 and served as an Able Seaman in MGB 314 for Operation Chariot, the raid on St Nazaire – dubbed 'the greatest raid of all'. He was the gunlayer on the forward 20mm cannon with no protection as they engaged vastly more powerful German shore batteries and defences at close range. Despite being under intense and sustained fire, he continued to operate his weapon with great coolness and precision, suppressing enemy positions and protecting the Commandos ashore until he was finally

killed. He was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross and his citation acknowledged the collective bravery of Coastal Forces personnel in that action. He was killed on his wedding anniversary. His body was brought home and he is buried in Falmouth.



MGB 314, a Fairmile C 110ft MGB built in North Wales in 1941, was the Command platform for the operation and despite being badly damaged, withdrew successfully and made it home. Her commanding officer, Lieutenant Dunstan Curtis was an RNVR officer who was awarded the DSC and the Croix de Guerre for this operation.



The Naval Force Commander onboard MGB 314, **Robert Ryder**, a regular RN officer, was awarded the Victoria Cross for Operation Chariot. He had joined the RN in 1926 and qualified as a submariner, serving in the Far East. In 1933 he captained the ketch Tai-Mo-Shan on a 17000-mile voyage from Hong Kong back to Dartmouth, conducting intelligence gathering against the Japanese on the way. The yacht became the first vessel to belong to the Royal Naval Sailing Association. During Operation Chariot, once HMS Campbeltown was impaled on the dock, he remained on the spot coordinating operations and evacuating men for another 90 minutes. MGB 314, now full of dead and wounded, somehow managed to withdraw to safety. After the war he became a member of Parliament.

The signaller onboard MGB 314 was another RNVR rating, Acting **Leading Seaman Seymour Pike**. They had obtained recent copies of the German code books, so when eventually challenged by the shore defences, Pike was able to reply with some reasonably convincing messages with his Aldis lamp. They were eventually rumbled, but his coolness bought the British invaluable time. He was awarded the DSM for his part in the action.

Eve Branson was a professional dancer before the war. Two boyfriends were killed in action and 'determined to do her bit' she joined the Air Training Corps disguised as a boy. She was eventually found out and transferred to the WRNS where she trained as a signaller, serving on the Isle of Wight. After the war she danced with the Ballet Rambert before joining British South American Airways and meeting her husband. Their son Richard is a well-known entrepreneur.

The WRNS signaller in this monument is a tribute to Eve Branson and the 75000 women who served in the WRNS during WW2, many of them attached to Coastal Forces.

Coastal Forces first came to prominence towards the end of the First World War. The story of the remarkable technological developments of the time – petrol engines, planing hulls, radio communications is fascinating enough – matched only by the men who served in them. One individual stands out: Augustus Agar VC.

Augustus Agar VC DSO had a remarkable Naval career by any standards. He saw action at Gallipoli, North Russia and Zeebrugge in the First World War and the Indian Ocean in the Second.

At Zeebrugge and Ostende, Agar and his CMBs had been primarily used to lay smoke screens. At the end of the War, they became involved in an extraordinary Secret Service mission to extract a British spy and were sent to the Eastern Baltic, where the Royal Navy was tasked with keeping the sea lanes to Finland and the newly independent Baltic States free from Bolshevik control.

To support the wider Navy effort and largely on his own initiative, on 16 June 1919 Agar led two CMBs to attack the Bolshevik fleet anchored at Kronstadt. One boat, CMB7 hit a



possible floating mine, was damaged and had to be towed back to harbour. The following night Agar set out alone in CMB4 in worsening weather. CMB4 penetrated the destroyer screen but had some issues with the torpedo firing charge, so stopped to carry out effect repairs in full view of the enemy. Twenty minutes later they were underway again and fired their torpedo at the cruiser *Oleg*, which sank. Agar returned to the relative safety of the open sea under heavy fire. He was awarded the Victoria Cross.



Agar with the crew of CMB4

On 18 August, he returned to Kronstadt, this time leading six newly delivered CMBs through the minefields and under the forts. The attack, pressed home by Commander Claude Dobson in a 55' CMB, damaged two dreadnought battleships and sank a submarine depot ship. Agar was awarded the DSO. Dobson and Charles Steel, driving another 55 footer, won the Victoria Cross; Agar's helmsman Russell McBean, now driving CMB31 was awarded the DSO.

Others were always likely to be 'extraordinary'...



Lieutenant Commander Peter Scott MBE DSC* RNVR, the renowned ornithologist, conservationist and painter served with Coastal Forces throughout the war, seeing action at Dunkirk, Dieppe and in the English Channel. His father was the famous Antarctic explorer Captain Robert Falcon Scott and before joining the RNVR he had established himself as a painter and Olympic yachtsman, winning Bronze at the 1936 Olympics in Germany. In his early military service, Scott was heavily involved in the development of Allied camouflage painting of warships and appointed MBE in 1942 in recognition of this. He was mentioned in despatches twice and won two DSCs between June and November 1943 whilst in command of the Steam Gunboat 'Grey Goose'. After the war he founded the Wildfowl and Wetlands trust. He skippered the 12 metre yacht *Sovereign* in the 1964 America's Cup and was knighted in 1973 for his work in conservation. He became a Companion of Honour in 1987. His book 'The Battle of the Narrow Seas' chronicles his time with Coastal Forces.

Patrick MacNee, who starred in *The Avengers*, enlisted in the RNVR as an Ordinary Seaman in 1942. He was subsequently commissioned in 1943 and served in Coastal Forces throughout the war, mainly on convoy protection duties in the English Channel.



Sir Alec Guinness was an RNVR officer who drove landing craft in the Mediterranean and in the D Day landings. His first stage role came in 1934 but he joined the RNVR in 1941. His naval discipline and exposure to the complexities of human emotion in war shaped his subsequent career.

Sir Laurence Olivier and **Sir Ralph Richardson** served in the RNVR as Fleet Air Arm pilots.

Nicholas Montserrat served in escort frigates – as evinced in his most famous novel *The Cruel Sea*. Here's a great story:

Montserrat was captain of a corvette departing an East Coast port when three MTBs came past on their way out to sea. He sent them a message by light 'Good Luck!' To which the answer came back 'We rely on skill...' The message came from Peter Scott.

Who were the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve?

The Naval Service in both World Wars was comprised of three groups of people: the regular Royal Navy, the Royal Naval Reserve and the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve.

The 'regulars' were the career people, who joined the RN as a profession. Numbers peaked at around 250,000.

The RNR were made up of Merchant Seamen, professional seafarers who were expected to give up a certain amount of time to serve with the regular Navy. Numbers peaked at around 100,000 and they were mostly used in convoy escort and minesweeping. They were also widely employed aboard Coastal Forces vessels as Engine Room Artificers.

The RNVR were volunteers from across society. None of them were professional seafarers, although many were yachtsmen or fishermen. Before the war, everyone joined the RNVR as a Rating and a percentage then selected for officer training. By 1942, there was no further intake of ratings – who were instead 'called up' straight into the Navy as 'Hostilities Only' personnel. Around 425,000 volunteered, becoming the backbone of the wartime Navy. They served predominantly in Coastal Forces, the Fleet Air Arm and landing craft. They were affectionately known as the 'Wavy Navy' because of the wave-like gold braid on their uniforms.

By 1945, 80% of the Navy's seagoing officers were RNVR and in 1958 the branch merged with the RNR.

In 1954, a plaque honouring the 6,200 RNVR personnel who died in World War II was unveiled at the Naval Club in London and the building was dedicated as a war memorial. The club no longer exists and whilst the memorial plaque and roll of honour is now at the Army and Navy Club there is no national or public focus for the legacy of this remarkable bunch of ordinary people...