



" The Greatest Raid of All"

And other Wartime Memories of the Royal Navy.

By Dick Fulford.

F.S. Belfort was an elderly French Navy Seaplane Tender built in 1919. After the fall of France she joined our Fleet and was my first ship. I joined her in 1940 when she was alongside the China Clay jetty in Fowey & she eventually sailed to Dartmouth where she was moored in the middle of the River Dart between the Kingswear and Dartmouth ferry terminals.

She had been converted into a Depot & Repair ship for Coastal Forces - Administration, Engineering Workshops and Accommodation for spare crews - and me! She looked after some of the Royal Navy's small warships, MTBs, MGBs, MA/SB's and ML's - Motor Launches.

I had been in the Navy just three months. Fortunately the Captain's secretary was a raw recruit too so we muddled through. If this was an example of life in the Wartime Navy then I was all for it. Ashore most nights, duty frees, daily grog ration and weekend leave once a month. "A life on the Ocean Wave" - I was glad I joined!

But Alas! Their Lordships, unknown to all concerned, were planning something sinister, for in March 1942 there occurred what has since been referred to as "The greatest raid of all", the raid on the only enemy Battleship Dock on Germany's Western Seaboard at St Nazaire.

The Normandie Dock at St Nazaire was the only one able to accommodate the TIRPITZ and Germany's other Capital Ships. To keep this menace away from our Atlantic shipping the Dock had to go. It was considered impregnable so had to be blown up. Yet situated at the mouth of the Loire, this seemed almost impossible.

HMS Cambeltown, an old expendable destroyer, was gutted and chosen to be the source of the explosion. She was packed with an enormous weight of explosives and manned with a chosen RN crew and Commandos to blow the whole of the dock and surrounding area to smithereens. And the 16 MLs plus one MTB and one MGB were chosen to escort her to the Loire from Falmouth and were then to act as rescue vessels after the raid.

The escort vessels were built of mahogany and ran on petrol! And because of the distance, extra petrol tanks were added. What chance did they have against a very heavily defended enemy river mouth!

However this daring night raid was planned for the night of March 28th 1942. "Into the jaws of death rode the 600" - in fact 611 men took part; 345 Navy personnel, 166 soldiers from 2 Commando, 91 forming demolition teams from the combined Commandos plus a medical party, 3 liaison officers and 2 Press representatives.

Success was overwhelming, for the Dock was out of use for 10 years, such was the destruction. Enemy Capital ships were never again able to reach out from Norway to destroy our Atlantic shipping. But sadly the cost was high for only one of the MLs (out of 16) returned to Falmouth.

105 sailors were killed, many were wounded and most of the remainder taken prisoner. 64 Commandos died, most of the others were taken prisoner. Amazingly 6 soldiers eventually reached Gibraltar and then rejoined their Units to fight again. What stories they could tell!

Admiral of the Fleet Earl Mountbatten said of the raid:

"I know of no other case in Navy or Military Annals of such effective damage being inflicted so swiftly with such economy of force, for in less than half an hour from the moment the "Cambeltown" rammed, all the Commando's chief demolition objectives were successfully achieved".

He continued: *"No fewer than five VCs were won at St Nazaire, surely by far the highest proportion of VCs ever awarded for a single operation; and this is the measure of the heroism of all who took part in that magnificent enterprise".*

I don't believe it will ever be known how many German and French personnel were lost. The delay between the "Cambeltown" ramming the dock and then exploding was considerable and in the interim period the ship and surroundings attracted many visitors!

Some 57 years after, I went to La Baule on holiday. Here was the War Cemetery where many of those who died at St Nazaire rested. As is so often the case, many of the graves were marked "An unknown sailor, known only unto God". Obviously chaps I had known. Able Seaman Bill Savage VC was not there. I learned after, through Tom Ashmore's effective computer system, that he was taken home, obviously by ML 160 and buried at Falmouth. A hero's ending.

I did, however, view the grave of Sergeant T F Durrant VC. It was beautifully attended at La Baule cemetery and the Victoria Cross was engraved on his tombstone.

In a small way I was involved with the St Nazaire Raid. 42 very high awards were made to the sailors and quite a number were "mentioned in despatches", many posthumously. It was so rewarding to have dealt with the administration work involved with some of these awards. It was also painful to have dealt with the sadder business.

I've learned much about St Nazaire since 1942. Many of my Shipmates were heroes. I remained safely on this side of the ocean - I was no hero!

Shortly after St Nazaire I was drafted to the "proper" Navy. I joined HMS Anson in 1942, a ship which, in hindsight, must have greatly benefited from the Raid. We spent 2 years protecting Russian Convoys from such as the Tirpitz; an enemy ship which caused little trouble again.

When writing these notes, interesting and amusing memories flashed back to those days. I vividly remember Lieutenant Tom Boyd DSO, the skipper of ML160 coming into the office to report to the Captain of "Belfort". He was improperly dressed - a section of his cap was missing; it had been shot away!

And just another interesting memory, Lieutenant Leslie Fenton DSC the Skipper of ML156 returned, but his boat had to be scuttled on the way back. He was an American, a well known Hollywood

actor. His wife, who lived in Dartmouth at that time, was Anne Dvorak the very famous Hollywood film actress.

I remember Mr Editor lending you the book "The greatest raid of all" by C E Lucas Phillips. I know you were impressed with the book's great details, and read of the parts played by 2 of your former Army colleagues. Any member is welcome to borrow this book - just ask!*

** They were from the Liverpool Scottish and were mobilised with me in August 1939. Capt. Roy was awarded the D.S.O. (he led 2 Commando) and R.S.M. Alan Moss (M.I.D.). It's a small world! Editor*

(This is a transcribe of the story from our Magazine "In Touch").