

“A HAMMOCK IN A GUNBOAT”



**HMS GREY GOOSE (SGB 9) Commanded by Lt
Cdr Peter Scott**

Leading Telegraphist RN D.W. White

1937 to 1949

Anyone who had seen, and heard, the spitting and fizzing of an old wireless spark transmitter will be left in no doubt why Telegraphists of the Communications Branch of the Royal Navy were, and presumably still are, collectively known as 'Sparks'. A surprising number of 'Sparks' in my day had started life, as I did at the tender age of 14, with the Post Office as a Telegraph Boy, and those of us who subsequently decided to see the world with the Navy found ourselves more or less automatically accepted for training at one or other of the RNB Signal Schools; in my case in 1937 at Devonport, more affectionately known as 'Guzz'. It seems to have been accepted that there was some sort of affinity between the Post Office and Naval Communications.

After the obligatory basic training on entry, which lasted eight weeks and which included daily parades, 'square bashing', swimming, physical training and seamanship for everyone regardless of the rating to which one aspired. Some 15 of us formed up as a class to commence training at the Signal School. Although there is difficulty in recalling so many names of shipmates of those days, the Instructor who was to be saddled with us for the next 18 months, and who subsequently, during the war, was commissioned, was CPO Tel Durston. Although the Navy was equipped with then up to date marine radio equipment, it was by present day standards of advanced technology, still a bit antiquated. For example, the Cruiser GLOUCESTER, on which I later served, which was launched in 1937 and commissioned in January 1939, was fitted with very up to date transmitting and receiving equipment, but still had a 'spark' transmitter as 'standby'. On the rare occasion that the spark transmitter was 'activated' for training or trial use it effectively blotted out all other wireless receivers within range. Fortunately for other 'air' users it was never used seriously, but its existence demonstrated that the Admiralty still had lingering doubts about the reliability of 'wireless' communication.

Radar had, of course, not been heard of in those days nor did we enjoy the services of Radio Mechanics or Technicians of any description, our training therefore covered all aspects of wireless communication, and in addition to becoming proficient in use of the Morse code until 22 wpm (words per minute) became second nature, and being drilled in Wireless Procedures, we were also trained in what was then termed "Magnetism & Electricity" and required to become familiar with the maintenance of the transmitters/receivers then in service. On completion of my naval engagement in 1949 I deserted the world of radio for a totally different career and in consequence forgot most of what I'd learnt about the workings of 'wireless' sets, but a look at my 'Wireless History Sheet' tells me that amongst other things, I was regarded as qualified to maintain and operate 'Multi Valve Amplifiers and Super heterodyne Receivers' and was proficient in the operation of Direction Finding equipment all of which is now museum stuff. But the Morse code is indelibly etched on my brain. In addition, and as something of a sideline, we Sparks were also given semaphore training; our efforts in that direction giving some amusement to our Bunting Tosser friends who were training alongside us in the Signal School.

For our part we sometimes enjoyed the antics of groups of Signalmen, each with a small flag, marching and counter marching in imitation of a battle fleet in line and manoeuvring to flag signals - shades of Dogger Bank and Jutland - in 1937/38! Throughout the long period of training, we enjoyed breaks for sport, for boat work, and occasional days out at sea with a duty Destroyer; but the first real taste came with the Munich Crisis of 1938 at which time, although we had not quite completed our training, we were regarded as useful enough to be sent to sea.

Our Class was soon dispersed, and with half a dozen Seamen and Engine Room ratings, I was drafted to H.M.S. WOLVERINE, a V & W Class Destroyer of 1918 vintage, then at Portland. We were aboard for only a short time, and WOLVERINE soon reverted to the Reserve Fleet again, but it was a useful introduction to seagoing. (I was happy to learn many years later, that Wolverine survived the war). Anyway, after Chamberlain had waved his magic bit of paper, things settled back to as near normal as circumstances allowed. Our Class re-assembled- with only one or two still at sea somewhere - and towards the end of 1938 we finally passed out as qualified, but still very inexperienced Telegraphists.

As newly fledged batch of 'Sparkers' we became available to the Drafting Office at just about the right time. H.M.S. GLOUCESTER, which had been built in Devonport Dockyard and launched in 1937, was ready to be commissioned, and required something like 30 Wireless ratings of all ranks, so it was not surprising that several of us found ourselves detailed. Commissioning was very much an occasion; The ships' company of around 700, with the RNB Blue Jacket Band leading, marched to the dockyard where the formal ceremony took place in the presence of the Duke and Duchess of Gloucester.

Then followed the inevitable period of working up with exercises and evolutions of every description, and acceptance trials for the ship itself. One interesting task which was carried out in Portland Harbour, was 'Swinging the Compass'. Being young and agile I had already been detailed off for 'Aerial Party'. This required going aloft on the ships masts to maintain and clean the heavy glass rod insulators of the wireless aerials. Whilst engaged on that job one forenoon, the ship was being swung patiently through 360 degrees to check compass variations, which provided us with a bird's eye view of the surroundings of Portland and Weymouth.

All the departments of the ship having been duly tried and tested - patience especially sometimes - we eventually sailed from Devonport for the East Indies Station in March 1939. Rather surprising for that time of year both the Western Channel and Biscay were both on best behaviour, so when we anchored at Gibraltar we still couldn't claim to be 'sailors'. But the Med taught us a sharp lesson! Between Gibraltar and Malta we ran into the grandfather of all gales. A photograph taken from the bridge by the ship's photographer shows the bows under water up to A turret. B turret carried the broad red, white and blue identification

stripes during the Spanish civil war period.

The ships and our personal dignity, had suffered some damage which needed dockyard attention, so, with our sister ship Liverpool which had arrived before us, we were delayed at Malta, and it was May 1939 when we eventually arrived at Aden where we took over as Flagship, the C in C being Vice Admiral Sir Ralph Leatham.

In addition to the Liverpool we also had the Aircraft carrier Eagle which had started life on the stocks as a battleship for the Chilean Navy, however, the Admiralty had decided to buy the hull which was then converted as a Carrier. So far as I remember, Eagle had some Gloster Gladiators and Swordfish. Gloucester and Liverpool, with catapults across the waist, carried three Walrus amphibious flying boats.

Between our arrival in Aden and the declaration of hostilities on 3rd Sept. 1939, the squadron enjoyed what must have been one of the last 'Showing the Flag' cruises. During those summer months' leisurely calls were made to MOMBASA, ZANZIBAR, DAR ES SALAAM then across the Indian Ocean to the SEYCHELLS, on to the CHAGOS Archipelago, north east to COLOMBO in Ceylon. Then after a pause, to the ANDAMAN Isles in the Bay of Bengal, finishing up at RANGOON some distance up the IRRAWADDY River in BURMA. We had not been enjoying the exotic sights of Rangoon, with the golden dome of the SHWE DAGON Pagoda for very long before fresh orders were received. It can only be supposed that they were linked to the impending outbreak of hostilities, then only a few short weeks away, because we were away at very short notice on a long haul at speed right across the Indian Ocean to Simonstown in South Africa. I never did find out what the rush was all about - it may have been to do with the suspected presence of German raiders in the Southern Ocean - but we stayed at Simonstown for a while and enjoyed at least one train ride into Capetown, One event which I remember during that summer cruise, took place either at the CHAGOS or ANDAMAN Islands - I'm not sure which it was after all this time - but apparently it used to be the tradition to provide a live turtle as a token of loyalty to the Sovereign. On that occasion we were obliged to accept the gift. The seamen rigged up a canvas bath amidships and the turtle was received on board with due ceremony. It spent the next few days being viewed with considerable curiosity, and being overfed, by the ships company. However, when safely clear of the island it was rapidly restored to its true element, honours having been satisfied, and the ship's waist having been cleaned up to the Commander's satisfaction.

By the end of the summer the squadron was back in Aden which was 'home' port to ships in the north western part of the Indian Ocean. The other being TRINCOMALEE on the East coast of CEYLON.

The ships did not linger at Aden after the 3rd Sept., and although our first job was to contact British Merchant ships, it soon became something more serious as news of sinking started to come through and it was obvious that a surface raider was about.

I recall spending seemingly endless hours on the Radio Direction Finding Set, which was located in a small office at the back of the bridge between the legs of the tripod foremast, listening in on frequencies which it was thought would be used by the Germans. Orders were to report signal strength and bearing of any signal heard. This, of course, entailed turning the ring aerial above and differentiating between true bearing and reciprocal. Whether our Navigating Officer, or Admiralty, ever plotted anything useful as a result of those patient hours is not known. We were, of course, but one of many naval units engaged in the hunt for the raider. Our own area was through the MOZAMBIQUE Channel, where sinkings had occurred and well down south of the Cape of Good Hope. There were two plans' which were rehearsed. One, should the raider be met up with in daylight. The other, of course, for a night time encounter. To our relief we didn't have to implement either.

The GRAF SPEE, being brought to account by the EXETER, AJAX and ACHILLES, put an end to our fruitless wanderings and after over two months at sea without a break we went into DURBAN and enjoyed ten halcyon days of relaxations - we were a trifle vexed some time later to learn that what we thought was a sea keeping record had been beaten by a County Class Cruiser - the Cumberland I think - by an odd day or two.

The delights of DURBAN could not be enjoyed for long and our presence in that part of the world being no longer necessary we were soon on our way back north. The Admiral, his staff - and his official Rolls Royce - were off loaded and we passed through the Suez Canal to reinforce the Eastern Mediterranean Fleet at Alexandria at about the turn of the year. If my rusty memory is to be trusted, Gloucester and Liverpool became part of 2nd Cruiser Squadron. For a brief interlude at the beginning of 1940 the Eastern Med. was something of a backwater and it was possible to take a somewhat detached view of what was happening elsewhere, even the trauma of DUNKIRK seemed distant.

It was not too long however before we were brought up short. There were ships of the Navy with us in Alexandria when France collapsed, including the Battleship LORRAINE. I have a particularly vivid recollection of that time of being at anchor across the harbour wondering, with bated breath, whether the French would decide to fight their way out. In the event the question was peacefully resolved and we could let out our breath with relief.

Thereafter, things warmed up. Our first job, in company with the Liverpool, shortly after Italy had entered the fray, was shore bombardment of TOBRUK and BARIA. Following that there was plenty of sea time on patrols and sweeps with the object of bringing the Italian Fleet to action. There was also convoy protection role.

With the western end of the Mediterranean closed, convoys to Malta were run through from Alexandria. It was whilst providing cover for one in July 1940 that Gloucester suffered her first casualties. There had been daylong high level bombing and after successfully dodging most of the attacks there was a direct hit on the open bridge which wiped out everyone on, and in the immediate vicinity of it, including the Captain, Capt. F.R.GARSDIE, CBE, RN. Down in the main wireless office, which was my action station, apart from the stench of cordite fumes being sucked down by the ventilating fans, and the deafening hammer of the 4.7 AA Guns two decks above us, we had little knowledge of how things were going 'up top'.

Control of the ship had been lost for a short time but was rapidly recovered and Gloucester continued with her fighting efficiency hardly impaired, in spite of the loss of her Captain and about eighteen others, a high proportion of whom were officers.

Back in Alexandria patchwork repairs were made to the bridge so that Gloucester could continue to operate. What I remember about the period which followed, with a new Captain, Capt. ROWLEY RN, was the tedium of patrols, sometimes for two weeks at a time during which we were in two watches which meant that we forfeited a lot of sleep and off duty time.

Towards the tail end of 1940, in what seemed to be a bit of a lull at the far end of the Med., an order (AFO) was put up inviting some categories of rating to volunteer to return to UK for service in Coastal Forces, then beginning to build up. I don't remember whether MTB's or MGB's were specifically mentioned or not, but a couple of us decided to have a go since Telegraphists were included. We were treated to a good deal of ribald commentary by our messmates who, at that time, regarded the Eastern Mediterranean as much preferable to prospects in chilly home waters - little did anyone dream that only a few short months later Gloucester was to be lost at CRETE with so many of her company.

Anyway, our requests having been approved, the drafting arrangements were made and after a six week voyage from Port Suez, via the Cape, to Liverpool (in the requisitioned liner S.S, Reina Del Pacifico) we eventually found ourselves back in RNB Devonport just on two years from the day we had commissioned HMS Gloucester.

After some welcome home leave, the Signal School, to which of course we were attached while in barracks, decided that an upgrading and refresher course was called for. Also, being a newcomer to UK wartime conditions I was initiated into the joys of ARP and fire watching duties during some of the Plymouth air raids.

TO THE SMALL BOATS

I had begun to wonder whether the reason for my volunteering had been overlooked. However, I needn't have worried. On 6 March 1941 the entry on my record reads "Attack (MGB 50). The first part of the entry merely confirmed that I should be 'borne on the books' of HMS Attack which, to the best of my recollection was a shore establishment at Portland. In fact I went the comparatively short distance to FOWEY in Cornwall. I arrived in correct regular navy fashion complete with kitbag and hammock. Imagine trying to sling a hammock in a gunboat – the mind boggles! It is probable that I used it on the ancient vessel which served as a depot ship on the FOWEY River, but have no idea what fate it met. I certainly didn't use it again. A pity, it was very comfortable and I have become attached to it.

Alongside were several, what appeared to be, overgrown motor boats with turtle backed centre sections, a small cockpit affair at the fore end, and mountings for machine guns either side - .303 Lewis Guns I think. One such was MGB50. The small cubby hole containing the radio equipment compared unfavourably with a squat single wardrobe. It didn't take long to familiarise myself with its contents. I also, for the first time, met young officers with strange wavy gold rings on their cuffs for the first time. However, to return to MGB50, whether she was one of the early Power Boats fitted with Italian engines (Isotta Fraschini) I'm not sure. What I do know, is that the group of boats to which she belonged seemed to be beset with mechanical problems, and were obviously inadequate for operational purposes. Barely six weeks after arriving at Fowey, on 21 April 1941, we paid off, and crews were back at Gosport – my introduction to HMS HORNET – but not for long.

Within a month, 22 May 1941, Hornet's drafting office saw us on our way. This time the entry was "LYNX for MTBs". In fact MTB51. With other members of the crew – eight in all – we loaded a 3 tonner with all the appropriate stores and were eventually deposited at Thorneycroft's boat yard at Hampton. When we arrived MTB51 was still high and dry on a slip and loomed a trifle larger than when floated off a little later. In due course, having got all stores and kit aboard we sailed quietly down river and tied up at Westminster Pier where a brief commissioning ceremony took place, my task being to hoist the small white ensign at the appropriate moment – in those days we carried no Signalmen and 'Sparks' was expected to double up on those duties.

The performance was watched by a few curious observers on the embankment, and I often wondered whether the whole thing had been officially decreed, or whether it was a neat bit of PR thought up by our young Skipper Lt. W.I.C. EWART RNVR for the benefit of the nearby politicians.

Apart from MTBs built at Thames boat yards I doubt whether any other naval vessel was commissioned within sight of the Houses of Parliament. Later we moved on down the Thames to the estuary and tied up for the night at Southend Pier, and the following day headed out and round the corner to Dover where MTB51 was to be operational.

At Dover we docked regularly in the old Southern Railway Cross Channel Train Ferry Dock, at no great distance from the Lord Warden Hotel which housed the Base Offices of HMS LYNX, and other facilities. But we spent most of our time on the boat. The abiding memory of that dock, which was tidal, was the considerable drop from high to low tide. Coming on deck sometimes after working below one felt like being well down in a large pit, with a hefty climb up to the dockside above. With a number of boats tied up in such a confined place, all well loaded with high octane fuel, the fire hazard had to be treated with great respect. First action on the part of the Engine Room staff after a night in dock was to ventilate the boat. The fire risk probably worried us more than anything else. One boat - a Norwegian I think - did blow up early one morning and when we scrambled hurriedly on deck there wasn't much left of it.

Although eventually the vast majority of Officers in Coastal Forces were RNVR, there were still some regular Officers who established early reputations. Two who were at Dover then were Lt. Cdr. Eardley-Wilmot, and Lt. N. Pumphrey. I cannot remember their flotilla numbers, but as far as I recall we worked mostly with the former. We were also involved with some of the very early Commando Raids, one was the BRUNEVAL RADAR Station sortie with Lt. Cdr. Everitt. I clearly recollect the crew briefing as to the risks involved, and how we should behave if something went wrong and were taken prisoner. In the event our humble part in that particular affair was entirely uneventful.

In a lighter vein, our skipper had himself established a reputation of another sort. Lt. EWART invariably, even after an uncomfortable night patrol, returned from breakfast in the Lord Warden Hotel impeccably turned out in freshly laundered linen and best uniform, in consequence he became known to one and all as "Scruffy". Our own 'rig of the day' was normally the ubiquitous, off white, submarine polo neck jersey and sea boots. We were, off course, required to smarten up ashore and shed our 'Fred Kamo's Navy' rig when in public. Anyway to return to MTB51, she was, as I said, a Thorneycroft boat, as was 57 which I also crewed at one time. They, and others of the same design, were sturdy enough but were simply too slow to have been very successful, particularly in tackling the high speed German E Boats. Peter Scott credited them with 24 knots, which was positively slow by MTB standards. Their engines were also Thomcroft built and designated RY12's; - although how that bit of technical information should stick in my mind all this time is beyond me - perhaps they just weren't powerful enough!

MTB51's initial career came to halt as the result of a very bumpy ride back from patrol. In the small wireless cabin it meant grabbing for hand holds whilst trying to maintain listening watch. After a while it was apparent that 'something' had given way. There were ominous creaking sounds in the bilges. The boat had a distinctly uncomfortable 'feel' about her, and when eventually she was gingerly coaxed back to Dover and hauled up on a slip it was soon found that her back was broken - the equivalent of a 'greenstick fracture'. It was evident that repairs were going to keep her out of action for some time.

It would have been shortly after that incident that our Skipper 'Scruffy' Ewart, temporarily without a serviceable boat of his own, went out with a spare boat and did not return from patrol. I understand that he was subsequently reported as being a prisoner of war.

Anyway, being ashore for a while, it was obvious that we were not going to be allowed to idle our time away, and by Jan. 1942 were back once again at HORNET.

THE STEAM GUNBOATS

Only a week or two later, on 18 Feb. 1942, my service record has the entry "Attack (SGB4)". That cryptic endorsement marked the start of a period of just over 2 years in SGB4 - Grey Fox as, she was subsequently named. The most common explanation for naming the SGB's, (and incidentally they were never known as 'HMS' Grey Fox, etc;) was that Peter Scott, then our S.O., discovered an Admiralty rule that vessels over a certain length were entitled to be named. The SGB's with an overall length of 145 ft just satisfied the requirement. The names chosen, GREY GOOSE, FOX, SEAL, OWL, SHARK and WOLF reflected Peter Scott's naturalist and ornithological interests. Whether that was, or was not, the case, it's a nice idea.

There were, of course, seven SGB's originally, but No. 7, commanded by a Lieut. Bamet, was lost in June 1942 before acquiring a name. Her C.O. and most of her crew were picked up and became P.O.W's.

However to return to HORNET's task of finding crews for all the new Coastal Forces craft, it was evident that our prompt return from Dover in January 1942 was not unconnected with the need for crews of 30 or more to man the SGB's. With the exception of No. 9 - Grey Goose - which was commissioned in JULY, the other six were completed between February and April 1942, and must have taxed HORNET'S drafting resources somewhat.

Anyway, those of us destined for SGB 304, to quote her full pennant number, entrained for Scotland and after a tedious wartime train ride arrived at YARROWS yard on the Clyde. My first sight of the ship - one could hardly continue to call it a 'boat' - remains clear. In a covered fitting out basin, opposite what I think may have been a Hunt Class Destroyer also fitting out, SGB 4 with her sharply raked stem and sleek lines, looked every inch like a racey Destroyer in miniature.

The First Lieutenant, to whom we reported, was Lieut. John ERSKINE-HILL RNVR. He was also, at the time, entertaining his father who was MP for one of the Edinburgh constituencies.

Having settled in, my first task was to become fully familiar with the transmitting and receiving equipment, and it's associated spares, in a W/T Office which, by comparison with the MGB's and MTB's of that time, was palatial. Later, however, various additions took up what spare space there was. One of the early extras was a rudimentary radar set with a very small oscilloscope and an aerial which had to be rotated by hand. There was no Radar Operator to go with it so it's use was very much a DIY business. Subsequently I also had a small, then very highly classified, IFF set bolted to the bulkhead behind my head in a position guaranteed to crack the unwary skull. This enabled us to exchange recognition signals and distinguish between 'Friend' and 'Foe'. I was always a bit wary of that particular 'box of tricks' due to the fact that it contained a small explosive charge which, at the press of a button on the bridge destroyed the 'works'. Thankfully never necessary.

One activity which was highly impracticable in Coastal Forces craft was semaphore signalling, and elaborate use of flag signals, and Signalmen were not included in early crews. One also had to make do without the services of other tradesmen usually found in larger ships. 'Sparks', with a readymade small office, often found himself, certainly in my case, acting as Captains Clerk, Cook, Storekeeper, First Aider and other odd jobs man but more of that later. He also, of course, had the confidential books in their lead weighted bag should the need arise to dump them overboard - which we were on the brink of doing on one occasion!

Most of the Officers could get by slowly with the Morse code, and a lot of the exchanges between boats within visual distance was by ALDIS Lamp or the small blue light lamp at night. Short range R/T (Radio Telephone) was also available

However, to revert to our introduction SGB4.

Most of the first Captains of the SCB's were regular Officers. One can only suppose that the Admiralty still could not quite bring itself to trust these new little ships to RNVR Officers. Our Skipper was Lt. J.B. RITCHIE RN.

The overall impression was that SGB4, and her sisters, had all that Coastal Forces had been looking for to combat the E Boats; speed, size and armament, all of which modified changed or added to later, sometimes, sadly, not for the better.

Speed we certainly had to start with. Standing at the back of the bridge some time later - W/T not being required - whilst undergoing acceptance trials on LOCH LONG, a submarine, similarly engaged, signalled by ALDIS lamp to ask what we were hanging about for? We were at that moment, doing something in excess of 35 knots!

That sort of speed in sheltered waters was one thing, but it was quite another story later when we were on passage south through the Irish Sea where we encountered very foul weather. An Aircraft Carrier heading north was making heavy weather of it, so it doesn't require much imagination to appreciate how a small SGB was being thrown about. It soon became apparent that there was a lot more water slopping about in the bilges than there should have been. Eventually we were obliged to put into HOLYHEAD where, fortuitously, a small dry dock was available. Once in and pumped out, the cause was soon revealed as we viewed two or three feet of bilge keel peeled back like the lid of a sardine tin, springing some rivets in the process. Fortunately the damage was made good without too much difficulty and we were able to continue our passage, within a few days, to MILFORD HAVEN. From there, no chance being missed of making use of an extra escort, we helped shepherd a small group of coasters round Lands End and up Channel until we were allowed to break off near the Isle of Wight and enter Portsmouth.

TRAININS AND OPERATIONS

Newhaven was our primary operational base, but Weymouth also featured largely as the situation demanded. Weymouth was also of course the principal training base, and the home of "SWINLEY'S CIRCUS" as it was wryly referred to, Commander Swinley being the Training Commander. It has to be admitted that his efforts were not always greeted with enthusiasm. Having already completed operational tours there was a tending to regard the training base's efforts as trying to "teach grandmother to suck eggs". Forgetting, of course, that there were always new boats and crews to be initiated in the arts. There were lighter moments, and Weymouth attracted notable visitors occasionally. Lady Churchill came along to look us up one day and took a liking to one of the ship's cats - or it may have been the other way round - anyway she completed her walk along the quayside carrying the cat with her.

A feature of Weymouth, which survives apparently untouched, is a row of small hotels along the quayside, the end one being the Edward Hotel. These became the base offices and accommodation, and the theatre close by took on the role of lecture rooms. Weymouth was also where my wife and I met. She was then a WREN on the base staff, and to this day we have an affection for the place.

In May 1942, having had my technical credentials checked by the examiners during a short visit to Signal School, I 'picked up my hook' as leading Telegraphist. It's interesting to recall that the School had taken over LEYDENE HOUSE and its grounds at EAST MEON near Petersfield (now HMS MERCURY). Having been upped in rank I fully expected to be drafted back to the conventional - I almost said 'proper' - navy! But it seems that the complementing authority had decided that Steam Gunboats justified a Leading Tel and I was told to stay put, which I was happy to do.

It would be foolish of me to pretend to be able to recall the numerous operations and patrols in which SGB Grey Fox was engaged. Quite often there would be no more than two or three SGB's available at any one time, and I can only remember one occasion when four were together. Availability was hindered by modifications being carried out, probably the most notable being the fitting of armour plate over the boiler room and machinery space. The extra weight having an appreciable damping effect on speed. Heavier guns also added to what the hulls had to carry.

Many of the patrols were without incident, but several of the more notable actions are described with greater knowledge than I possess, by Peter Scott in his book "Battle of the Narrow Seas". Scott had a reputation for wanting to 'get on with it', and as Senior Officer of the 1st SGB Flotilla Commanded Grey Goose. But if Grey Goose was temporarily out of action for any reason he would be out with whichever one was available. Such was his determination that there were rare occasions when we were out in adverse weather conditions which would have made our efforts useless. The story is that on one such night some wag down the line signalled "How do you like your goose cooked". The response, after a decent interval, was the order to return to harbour

Crew changes were a regular occurrence and that included CO's. There were four Skippers during my time in Grey Fox. The first was Lt. J.D.RITCHIE, DSC,RN. His DSC was awarded after the night action on 12 July 1942, but more of that later. He was followed by Lt. R. ASHBY RNVR who was already with us when the action took place. He was followed by Lt. T.W.BOYD, DSO, RNVR a no nonsense extrovert character whose DSO had been won when in command of an ML at St. Nazaire.

Then came Lt. Peter Mason RNVR who was Skipper up to the time I was eventually drafted from Grey Fox shortly before D Day - by which time I was on my way back to the Mediterranean again -. At one stage Lt. P. Hood a Navigator of great skill was with us and he later commanded Grey Goose. But the one Officer who will unfailingly be remembered by Grey Fox's company was our 'Jimmy the One' Lt. John ERSKINE-HILL RNVR. John, whose affectionate nickname cannot be repeated here, must have established a record for unbroken service in the same SGB. He was a member of CVFA, but sadly is no longer with us.

BELOW DECK

A good deal has been written about the activities of MTB's and other craft of Light Coastal Forces, including at least one good fictional story by Douglas Reeman; but almost invariably the experiences related are told from the point of view of 'up top', either on the small bridge, or on the guns. This is natural, I suppose, since most of the crew were on deck in action.

Nothing was achieved however without the expert attention of the Engine room staff. In MTB's boxed in with their three Rolls Royce 'Merlins' thundering away, and two Ford V8 auxiliary engines to add to the power pack at their disposal, and in SGB's in a small Boiler Room and Engine Room.

Meanwhile, 'Sparks', plugged into his receiver in the small wireless office on the starboard side of the little galley flat was usually the only one below deck forward of the tank space - in the SGB's the fuel tanks were below the galley flat-. In that solitary position the only physical activity was in coping with the sometimes unpredictable banging and lurching of the boat.

I have been asked, as I'm sure have so many contemporaries, "What was it like?" or "What did you do?" or questions in a similar vein. An average night patrol or operation started when the Skipper, or more likely the 1st Lieut, returned to the boat from a briefing up at Base HQ with orders for the night. For Sparks this meant taking note of any special instructions regarding wireless frequencies, call signs, codes etc; and making sure that all the radio equipment was in working order. When time came for leaving harbour Sparks settled down, in a small swivel seat bolted to the deck with padded deckhead beams above! to keep an alert listening watch - W/T silence being a golden rule - and hoped for a reasonably comfortable night without too much excitement.

The important thing, since one could not see outside the small cramped radio compartment, was not to allow one's imagination to take over. Occasionally the Coxswain might be relieved at the wheel and would drop down through the hatch to be greeted by the inevitable question from 'Sparks' "'What's going on up top?" and if all was quiet on deck the 1st Lieut might appear at the door of the wireless office, to have a look at the signal log, in which case he would also be asked "Anything interesting happening _up there sir?" to which one hoped to get the answer "No 'Sparks', all quiet at the moment". It was standard practice to have a 'position' ready for transmission if an enemy sighting report had to be 'got off' in a hurry, and this would be updated by the Navigator at fairly frequent intervals. But apart from these diversions, one had to place one's own interpretation on what was going on from movements of the boat, sudden changes of speed, particularly if, in MTB's, having been stooging along on auxiliary engines, a crash start was made on main engines. I was more than once shot out of my stern facing seat when that happened without warning. Other indicators were sudden lurches to port or starboard, and, sometimes unexpectedly, the hammers of gunfire from the twin .5's immediately above one's head. During the course of these distractions a certain concentration was required to continue to maintain wireless watch. Mostly, however, if a Coastal Convoy was spotted, with 'Flack' Trawlers, R. Boats or E Boats in company, the enemy report which 'Sparks' transmitted was, for him, warning enough of the imminence of some excitement. Even then the gunfire, when opened up, could not always be anticipated precisely, nor the slight jolt if torpedoes had been fired. By and large these encounters were short and sharp and, unless touch was lost in the darkness, likely to be repeated at intervals, and during the brief exchanges the lads 'up top' were much too busy to pay much attention to 'Sparks' down below - that's when the imagination could run away a bit if not checked. However, once things quietened down there would be a caller or two to describe their version of the meeting.

Being below had its compensations I suppose. It was a bit dryer and warmer than for the lads up top who were frequently cold and wet, but any idea of greater protection was illusionary since the thin hulls offered very little resistance to stuff flying around. Twice in my experience the radio receiver going suddenly 'dead' told me immediately that my aerials had been shot away. Rigging jury aerials had, of course, to wait until the bridge gave the all clear, otherwise one would have been blundering about in the dark getting in the way of those on the bridge and gunners.

The boredom of a long, often uneventful, night patrol off the French and Dutch coasts, was relieved to some extent by the fact that the designers of all the MTB's I knew - and the SGB's - placed the little galley on the port side directly opposite the wireless office. So it fell to 'Sparks' to keep everyone supplied with hot drinks.

With a long lead on the earphones it was comparatively easy to remain plugged in to the wireless receiver, and at the same time coax the paraffin pressure cooker in the galley opposite into behaving itself long enough to brew up the 'kai' or a kettle of soup - the motion of the boat permitting of course. I usually took the prior precaution of 'buzzing' the bridge to ask if there was a reasonable prospect of keeping steady for a while. Knowing that there was a good hot drink in the offing the coxswain usually managed to comply. In the SGB's we lived aboard, and with a somewhat enlarged capacity in the galley I occasionally, in harbour, managed to produce something a bit more ambitious in the way of a 'spotted dog' but a reputation as a 'cook' was something I was not prepared to encourage.

On a less pleasant note the galley flat, conveniently situated amidships below the charthouse, was the most comfortable spot for 'walking wounded' to stay, with 'Sparks' to keep a friendly eye on them. Happily we suffered few casualties in Grey Fox although we came close to sinking one never to be forgotten night in July 1942.

There were two of us out that night, SGB8 (Grey Wolf) and Grey Fox. The patrol was on the enemy convoy track off the French Coast somewhere south of Boulogne. In the early hours, sometime after midnight a group of minesweeping R Boats was encountered in very dark and wet conditions. I'm not sure whether the enemy report which transmitted to Dover was all that precise about the number of German boats involved, or what they were doing. Having got the signal off and received the acknowledgement, my immediate thoughts were that something lively was about to happen. So far as I remember the almost simultaneous result was a sharp heel to starboard as the ship turned, and a burst of gunfire from our own gunners. This was followed, almost immediately by what my mind registered as an explosion on the port side forward. I was thrown violently out of my seat and against the ships side. As I picked myself up the ship slowly righted itself and I have an indelible picture on my mind of seeing sea water pouring through the open watertight door in the bulkhead between the galley flat and the wardroom passage through which spare ammunition had been passed. At that precise moment there was no one forward of that bulkhead, and by good fortune - or perhaps design - the watertight door closed from forward and as I pulled it together the inrush and water pressure behind it helped to slam it closed making it easy to knock the clips on. We were well down by the bows and I think the fear of sinking was still uppermost, but our forward gunner was still firing. Some minutes later the 1st Lieut came down and between us we completed shoring up the bulkhead with timbers kept at the far end of the galley flat for that purpose.

I then learned, from Lt. Erskine-Hill, that what I had thought was a explosion was the sound of the German R Boat as it rammed itself through the ships side into the wardroom and forward messdeck. It shortly afterwards fell away and sank leaving a large gash in our bows. Our sister ship Grey Wolf which by this time had lost sight of us in the dark, could get no response to her signals and had assumed the worse.

The simple explanation was that I was temporarily without power for my transmitter, all the fuses having been pulled in order to extinguish the lights still on in the wardroom and forward mess deck which were shining out through the wide gash in the ships port side. After a while it proved possible to restore power to the transmitter and Grey Wolf was relieved to hear my signal to Dover giving our position and course to disengage.

The next couple hours or so was considerably nerve wracking, sitting on watch with the ship very much down by the bow and wondering, apprehensively, whether the bulkhead against which I sat would hold. The level of water on the other side could clearly be seen by the condensation line which was somewhere near shoulder high, with the deck of the wireless office awash.

Grey Wolf found us again in due course; We were, apparently, wavering sluggishly all over the place but heading slowly in the correct general direction, and managed to get back to within sight of Newhaven under our own steam. However we could not be trusted to keep a straight enough course to enter harbour unaided and Grey Wolf took us in tied alongside. I don't remember ever being so relieved to get off watch.

Daylight revealed what a remarkable escape we had had. Lt Erskine-Hill solved the problem of inspecting the damage by the simple expedient of rowing the dinghy through the hole in the ship side! So as I remember we managed to salvage a few bits and pieces, but Grey Fox was obviously not going anywhere in a hurry.

Within a few days we were on our way, being towed stem first to Southampton where we were put straight into a dry dock - long since filled in and now part of the yacht marina at Ocean Village'. The damage was such that the ship repair people's task was simplified - they simply got to work with oxy-acetylene torches and cut off what was left of the bows, and rebuilt a new bow. This of course took several weeks, during the course of which many of the crew were returned to HORNET leaving a small number from each department lodged ashore. The period of docking coincided with a programme of refitting during which the armour plating was added weight of which subsequently reduced the speed which had been a significant design feature of the original hulls.

We also viewed, with some incredulity, the fitting of a 3 inch gun on the stem. This could only be done by reinforcing the strength of the after deck with between deck stanchions, to take the weight and recoil. Even so when eventually we were ready for sea again and the gunnery experts came aboard for testing and calibration of the gun sights the first firing of the gun was accompanied by some apprehensions. However, apart from some dust and flakes of paint nothing untoward happened, and the 3 inch gun was a useful addition in later actions.

By mid 1943 the other SGB's had been similarly modified and we were again operating as a flotilla, mostly on night patrols, many of which, were with negative results. There were also daytime outings now and again just to make a change.

As mentioned previously, when enemy boats were met up with, either M Class Sweepers, R Boats or E Boats, the engagement was often short and sharp, but the one occasion that I remember there being four SGB's together, the scrap lasted something like two hours from the time of first sighting. On that night, in the autumn of '43 the report was of a force of well armed minesweepers moving west, this, at least, I knew having taken down the signal from Dover. From then on, as was usual, my knowledge of what was going on 'up top' was mainly a string of impressions gained from the movement of the ship, sudden bursts of gunfire, then silent pauses, now and then a signal from the S_tO. or one of the other SGB's trying to maintain contact. At infrequent intervals someone might drop down through the hatch and look into the wireless office briefly with a hurried "How you doing Sparks?" but often without being able to offer any clear information about results of the encounter. My contribution was to concentrate on keeping wireless watch and trying to make sure not to miss any signals on our particular frequency. Not an easy task when the only physical activity involved was sitting in front of the radio equipment, making fine adjustments to the tuning to counteract the severe jarring and vibrations, reading signals sometimes weak or jumbled and occasionally making one on instructions from the bridge; At the same time trying not to be too distracted by the racket above and outside.

Whether the specific result of that night's encounter were accurately known or not, the fact is that the four SGB's returned to harbour the following morning with, so far as I remember, only a few casualties and surprisingly little damage. During winter months bad weather inevitably had a restrictive effect on our activities; patrols were of course continued but were sometimes very wet and cold especially for the lads on the guns. However memory being fallible, I cannot recall anything particularly remarkable for myself. One thing is certain though; Whoever was responsible for 'Personnel Records' at Gosport or Devonport had not forgotten me.

It seems that two years in an SGB fully qualified me for a move elsewhere, and by the end of the summer of 1944 I was back once again in the Mediterranean, but that's another story.

