

THE
FREE FRENCH
IN
KINGSWEAR

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M.L. 182
M.T.B. 92.

THE FREE FRENCH 23rd M.T.B. FLOTILLA AT KINGSWEAR IN WORLD WAR TWO.

The First Free French Arrive, 1940.

There was a Free French naval presence in the area from the time of the fall of France. Two tugs, *L'Isère* and *L'Aube* sailed here after Dunkirk and operated in the river throughout the War. In 1941, *Mistral*, a French destroyer, manned at the time by a R.N. crew, turning in the river in bad weather, began drifting on to the rocks off Bayards Cove. The Great Western Railway ferry, the *S.S. Mew* (Capt. Bill Harris) which was proceeding across the river to meet the 9.30 a.m. train from Newton Abbot, seeing *Mistral's* plight, responded. Both the *Mew* and the *Isère* managed to tow the *Mistral* to safety. Also in 1941, an accident aboard a French Submarine *Chaser* resulted in five deaths, the sailors being buried in Dartmouth.

The hulk of the Minesweeper *Caporal Peugeot* can still be seen in the South Creek at Noss. She finished her working life as a barrage balloon tender, of which there were several in the river. Apart from French built vessels, the re-formed French Navy was equipped with British built vessels from destroyers down to small coastal craft and mainly based around the east and south coasts. The river Dart was the home of several units of Coastal Forces operating in the Channel.

The Formation of the 23rd M.T.B. Flotilla.

The origins of the 23rd. M.T.B. Flotilla were in 1941 when the F.N.F.L. (Forces Navales Françaises Libres) manned four Motor Launches, Nos. 123 (*St. Ronan*), 245 (*St. Guénolé*), 246 (*St. Yves*) and 247 (*St. Alain*). This Unit formed the 2nd Division of the 20th M.L. Flotilla, which was based at Portland; the First Division being British manned and which subsequently lost all its boats during the

attack on St. Nazaire on the 28th March 1942. The flotilla were mainly engaged in coastal escort duties, defensive patrols and air-sea rescue.

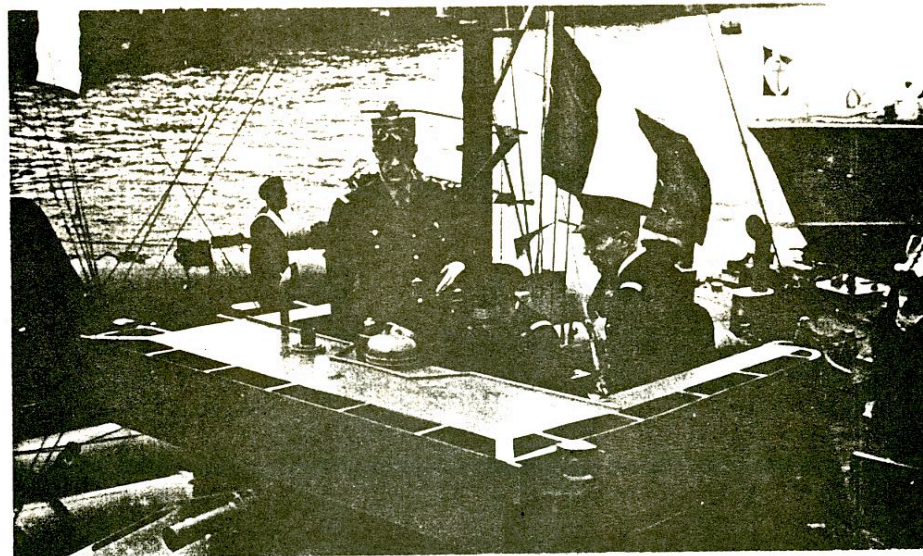
In April/May 1942, the 20th M.L. Flotilla was reformed as an entirely French manned unit of 8 boats. In addition to those previously named, the new boats were 182 (*Sein*), 205 (*Molène*), 269 (*Béniguet*) and 303 (*Ouessant*). In August 1942, all vessels were decommissioned and returned to the Royal Navy. The crews provided the nucleus of manpower for the newly formed 23rd Flotilla which were then equipped with new Motor Torpedo Boats. After initial sea trials at H.M.S. *Hornet*, all crews underwent intensive training at the H.M.S. *Bee* in Weymouth, where the handling of the boats, equipment and weapons was practised. After four weeks of "working up", the boats and crews were then deemed fit to undertake operational duties.

Général de Gaulle Inspects.

On the 18th of January, the Flotilla was inspected by Général de Gaulle, who was accompanied by the head of Free French Naval Forces, Admiral Auboyneau. Due to the General's height the requisite size of oilskins were difficult to find but eventually extra large ones were obtained and the distinguished visitors embarked for an inspection at sea. After dinner at the Gloucester Hotel in Weymouth the General and his staff returned to London.

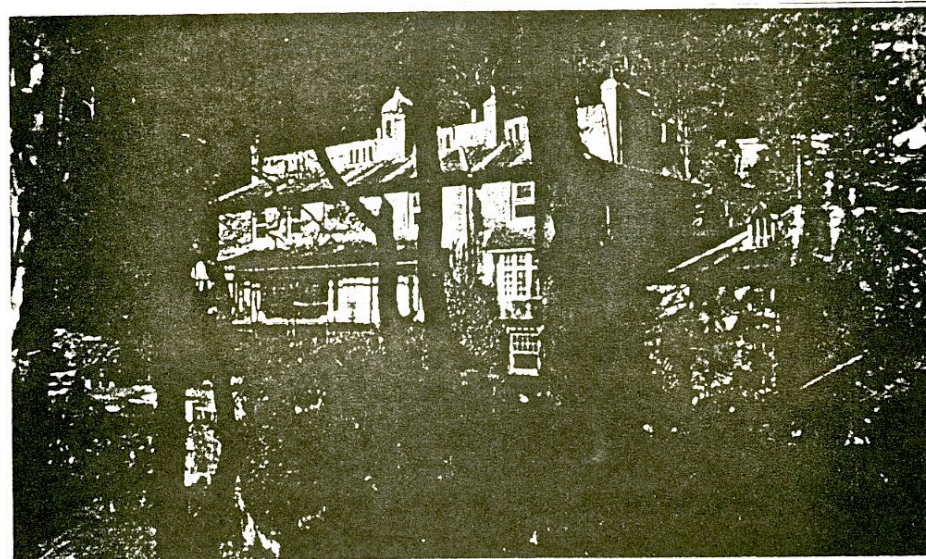
Arrival in Kingswear.

The advance party of the 23rd. Flotilla arrived in Kingswear in January 1943. Their H.Q. was Brookhill, an imposing house overlooking the Dart which looks very much the same today as it did fifty years ago. The first night was spent at the Redoubt, which at the time housed R.N. and R.M. personnel. The Officers were subsequently billeted at Longford, the crews being housed at Brookhill, Kingswear Court and several other private billets. The Royal Dart Hotel was the H.Q. of the local Royal Navy shore base bearing the rather grand title of H.M.S. *Cicala*. It was from here that overall operational command of the 23rd and other coastal force units in the area was exercised. The name, but not its location or usage must have been known to the Germans as it was referred to in a radio broadcast by the propagandist William Joyce, more commonly known to the people of Britain as "Lord Haw Haw". When commenting on damage inflicted on



Général de Gaulle inspects the 23rd at Weymouth, 1943.

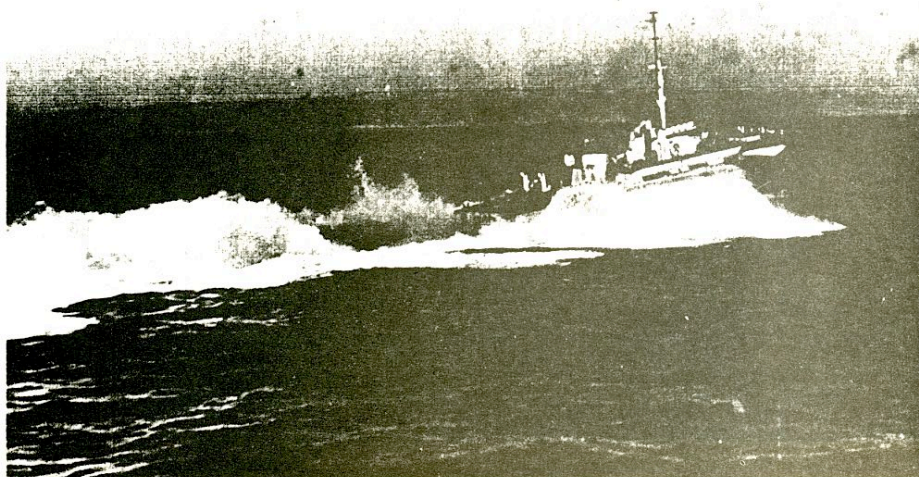
18 Janvier 1943



Brookhill, Headquarters of the 23rd Flotilla.



Admiral d'Argenlieu, Free French Navy, and Liason Officer Lt. E. Waldmeyer, R.N.V.R. *non, c'est un Capitaine de la RN.*



M.T.B. 227 on patrol.

Dartmouth by German bombers he proudly informed his listeners that H.M.S. *Cicala* had also been sunk!

British Liaison Officers.

Initially, the Flotilla was commanded by Capitaine de Corvette Meurville and later by Lieutenant Iehle. Three British Liaison Officers served with the Unit. They were Flynn, Hatfield and Waldmeyer. Initially there was a fourth L.O., but as this chap's forte in languages was limited to Norwegian, he was posted away to duties more befitting his qualifications. The three British L.O.'s were fluent French speakers. Flynn was an Irish journalist who had previously been employed as a correspondent of an English daily newspaper, based in Paris. Unfortunately, he was later badly wounded in combat aboard M.T.B. 96 and was transferred out of the unit. Waldmeyer, though one would not realise this from his name, was a Welshman. He was a large man in all respects and was known for the huge steps he took when walking. In spite of repeated bouts of seasickness he went to sea regularly and was a very popular officer with his French colleagues. Hatfield was born in Spain, which language he spoke fluently in addition to French. He was a veteran of the battle of the Atlantic where he had served in British M.T.B.'s. He was well known for his dapper appearance, never to be seen without immaculate starched collars and well groomed hair. When he grew a beard, its daily progress was monitored closely by the French crews. He was well known for enjoying himself and on festive occasions could easily be persuaded to sing from his repertoire of old naval songs. It was largely due to these officers that the rapport that the 23rd enjoyed with other "foreign" units was so good. *Si il y en avait...* *une icorchure en réalité* None were regular Naval Officers, all being Lieutenants in the R.N.V.R. In addition to the British L.O.'s, ~~the~~ Royal Navy Telegraphists also served aboard the boats. They wore R.N. uniform and were under command of the L.O.'s for administrative and discipline purposes. During operations they came under the command of French Officers. British ratings over the age of 18 were eligible for a daily rum ration if aboard a R.N. ship flying the White Ensign. This did not apply to the 23rd and the ratings imbibed in the same fashion as their French shipmates, half a litre of Vin Ordinaire each day, usually taken with their meals.

The Arrival of the Boats, Feb. 1943.

In February the first of the boats arrived from Weymouth. The vessels were 72 foot Vosper designed Motor Torpedo Boats, their overall fully loaded

displacement being 60 tons. They were powered by three 1200 b.h.p. Packard engines, plus two Ford 75 b.h.p. auxiliary engines. These gave a theoretical maximum speed of 40 knots and a range of 420 miles. The boats' performances and fuel consumption varied considerably, depending on the sea conditions encountered at the time. They carried 2,500 gallons of 100 octane petrol. Armament consisted of 2 x 21" Torpedoes, 1 x 20mm Oerlikon, 1 x Twin 0.5" Vickers (later replaced by a twin Oerlikon) and twin 0.303 machine guns. Other weapons were Lanchester carbines, hand grenades, depth charges and a smoke screen apparatus. The crew was captain, midshipman, coxswain, signalman, torpedo man, 2 gunners, 2 radar operators, 2 radio operators and 3 motor mechanics.

The Unit comprised a depot ship, the French vessel *Belfort*, and eight Motor Torpedo Boats which were:-

Number	Constructed by:-	Completed:	Decommissioned:
90	Harland and Wolff	21.9.42	24.5.46
91	" " "	28.10.42	25.4.46
92	" " "	1.1.43	"
94	Berthon Boat	24.12.42	"
96	Morgan Giles	17.1.42	"
98	Vosper	17.10.42	"
227	Hugh McClean	31.10.42	20.6.46
239	Camper & Nicholsons	5.12.42	"

M.T.B. 98 is still afloat and having been converted for pleasure purposes, now bears the name *Grayling*. She is docked at Conyer Dock, Teynham, Kent. A bronze plaque on the vessel states that the ship was adopted by Litherland U.D.C. during "Warship week" on the 14/21st March 1942. The present owner is a Mr. Ron King. Likewise M.T.B. 239 was also converted from her wartime role to civilian use and now renamed the *Sarie Marais*, was photographed at the Rochester/Medway Bridge in January 1990.

The Depot ship *Belfort* was originally built as a sloop in the Naval Dockyard of Lorient in 1919. She was later converted to a seaplane tender and subsequently as a Depot Ship in a U.K. shipyard.

The Flotilla moored at the jetty which is presently used by the Dart Harbour & Navigation Authority. Torpedoes were stored in the green nissen hut which today is the workshops of the Authority. 100 Octane fuel was stored in four tanks which were sited below Hoodown House, the fuel being gravity fed to the jetty.

The First Sorties - and the First Success.

From the time of their arrival in Kingswear, exercises were carried out continuously between Start Point and Teignmouth, and on the 6th March the first operational sortie took place. At 1725 hrs. four of the boats slipped their moorings and headed to the coast of France at a steady 22 knots. Unfortunately at 2130 hours M.T.B. 227 sustained a fire in the engine room and was forced to return to base. The remainder pressed on, alternately changing their position and waiting in silence for a target to appear. The night passed without incident and the Flotilla returned to Kingswear the following day.

The first success came on the 10th March to M.T.B.s 94 and 96. After an all night vigil and shortly before the sortie was about to be called off, a German vessel of approximately 2000 tons together with an escort was spotted. M.T.B. 96 created a diversion by attacking at high speed, firing all her guns at the target. Both vessels replied, the Germans firing starshells which illuminated the attacker. Meanwhile M.T.B. 94 approached the freighter from the opposite direction in darkness and fired her torpedoes. Both hit the target and the bow of the German ship was seen to rise out of the water shortly before it slipped beneath the waves.

Rescue of a ditched R.A.F. Pilot.

Many patrols were uneventful but were nonetheless quite stressful for the crews. Weather conditions were varied, ranging from very rough to flat calm, and visibility from a bright moonlit night to thick fog. On the 16th April, off Ushant and in pitch darkness, a R.A.F. pilot who had bailed out of his plane was miraculously located and rescued.

Both Sides Suffer Casualties.

On the 5th May a large enemy force was encountered near the Sept Iles. Torpedoes were fired which missed their targets and resulted in heavy accurate gunfire being directed against the attackers. Much damage was sustained by the boats, many sailors being wounded. One boat limped back with 73 bullet holes in the hull and its bows a metre below the water line. In order to prevent it sinking it was immediately beached on the slipway when it arrived at Kingswear.

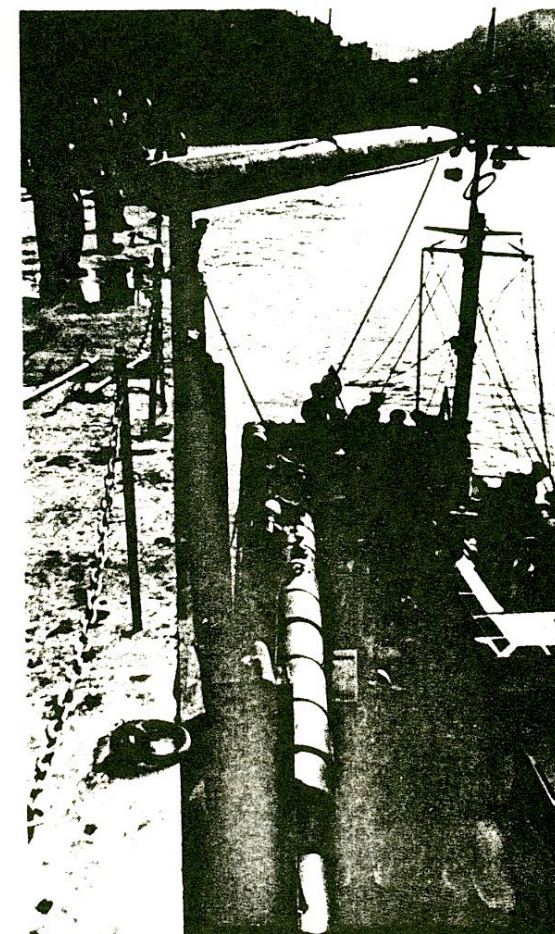
On the 10th September, South of Guernsey, an enemy convoy was spotted. A furious battle ensued in which an escorting German trawler was hit by a torpedo but unfortunately due to poor visibility and offensive enemy action it could not be ascertained whether the vessel was actually sunk.

On the 11th October near the Ile Vierge two M.T.B.s met two German E boats head on. After a sharp skirmish, both adversaries withdrew without damage.

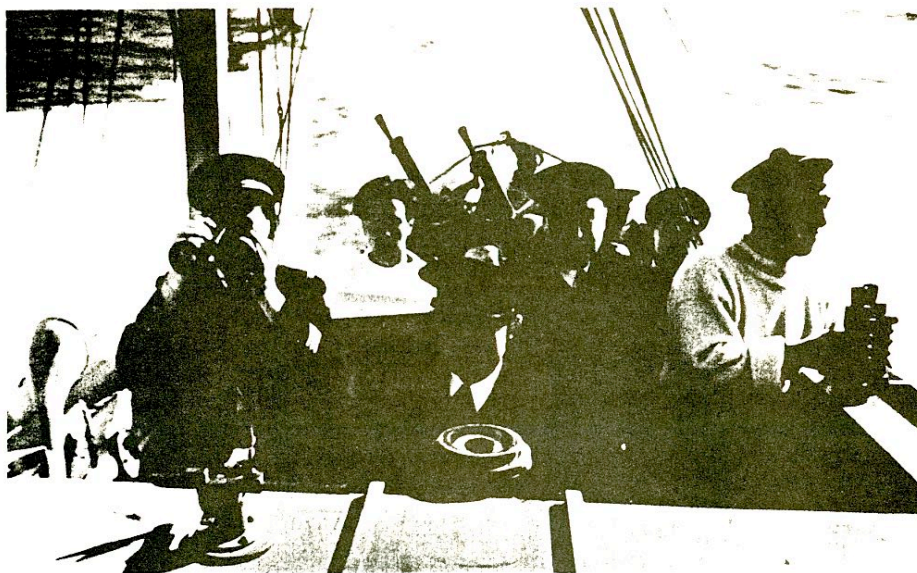
On the 26th December two German E boats were damaged by British cruisers and were reported heading for Brest. The 23rd were ordered to intercept the damaged boats but although they waited in ambush until the morning nothing was spotted. Being so near the French coast in daylight left the Flotilla prone to attack and they were escorted across the channel by R.A.F. Spitfires. On this sortie, crews had been at Action stations for a continuous period of 26 hours.

German Defences Strengthened.

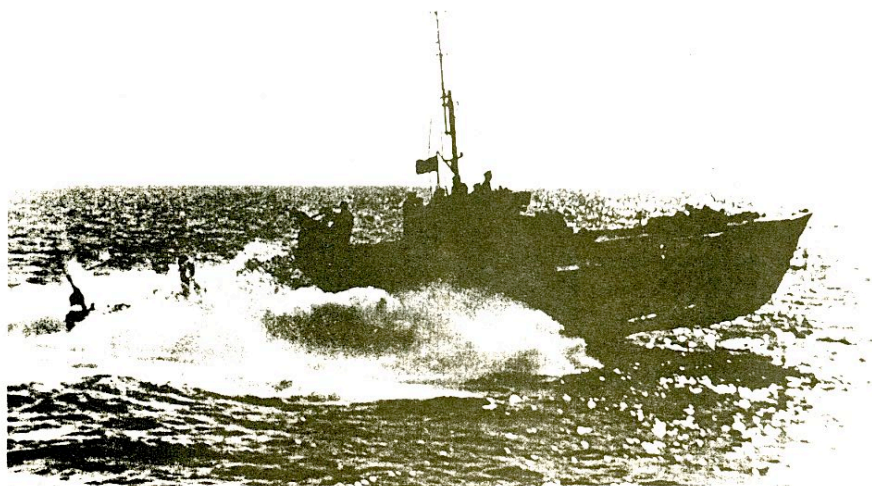
The growing strength of the British Coastal Forces, which were attacking convoys off the occupied mainland from the North Dutch coast to Brittany, brought a not unexpected response from the enemy. The number of escort ships were increased and the firepower of all German vessels upgraded to more accurate guns with larger calibres. By the close of 1943 it became increasingly difficult for the allies to mount successful attacks. On the 31st January a convoy was attacked, but such was the volume of heavy fire brought to bear on the Flotilla that it was not possible to close the range for a torpedo attack and it was fortunate that the boats escaped unscathed.



Loading torpedoes, Kingswear, 1943.



On the bridge of M.T.B. 96.



M.T.B. 96 on patrol.

To counter increased German resistance, the Flotilla went to Plymouth to practise revised techniques of combat based on the lessons that all Coastal Forces had learned from their recent engagements. This training was to prove invaluable in the coming months.

On the 20th March 1944 three boats from the Flotilla in a joint operation with three 'D' type British M.T.B.s were attacked by a large force of enemy vessels. This battle was unique inasmuch as this was the first time that they had been fired on by enemy shore batteries. All allied vessels were once again fortunate to escape without incurring damage.

The Battle off St. Peter Port, 8th May 1944.

The disappointment of so many unsuccessful encounters was erased on the night of the 8th May when fortune once again favoured the 23rd. M.T.B.s 91, 92, 227, and 239 were patrolling in pairs off the coast of Jersey. It was not a good night for an attack. There was a full moon, the visibility being excellent and a still easterly breeze brought showers of spray onto the decks and bridges of the boats. Near midnight, a convoy was spotted. This comprised a cargo vessel of about 3000 tons and a smaller one of about 1500 tons. It was heading in a northerly direction and it was assumed that its destination was Cherbourg. There were no less than eight escorts for these two ships, which was quite a formidable defence. Nevertheless, the decision was made to attack the larger vessel, the biggest problem being the good visibility and the need to close to 800 yards which was an effective range for torpedoes. It was decided to cross the stern of the convoy and then attack from the starboard side. This manoeuvre was carried out at a distance to avoid detection. Suddenly the whole situation changed when the convoy altered direction with the obvious intention of entering St. Peter Port. It was realised that the only hope of success was to attack immediately. Two boats created a diversion by opening up their engines, which soon trailed white turbulent wakes behind them, and closed on the convoy at high speed. This was soon spotted by the enemy who rained shot and shell on them. The other two boats meanwhile crept in from a dark background and were able to fire their torpedoes. An immense column of smoke and flame erupted from the target and when it had cleared the ship had disappeared.

All boats were now under attack and once again shore batteries, this time sited on Guernsey, had them in their sights. M.T.B. 227 had its vickers turret put

out of action, the gunner inside fortunately escaping injury. Two shells also hit the engine room which started a fire. Under the protection of a smokescreen the engine was restarted and 227 was able to limp away from the fray. The remaining M.T.B.s mounted a second attack but were driven off. By this time the second cargo vessel had entered the port and was safe. Three of the escorts however were stopped at the entrance picking up survivors from the sunken vessel and it was decided to attack again. Due to the strong possibility that these vessels would soon disappear into the harbour, torpedoes were fired at a greater distance than usual. The range was about 2000 metres and to everyone's relief an escort vessel was seen to explode. The M.T.B.s then closed at 30 knots shooting up the last escort before it could enter the safety of the port.

This was not the end of the matter. During the battle it had been observed that a large balloon, tethered by a steel cable to the seabed, was sited near the harbour entrance. It must have been inflated with a combustible gas, as a burst of machine gun fire quickly reduced it to a flaming mass. What was not realised was that the balloon was manned. As it fell to the water a body was also seen falling, and later cries were heard from the water.

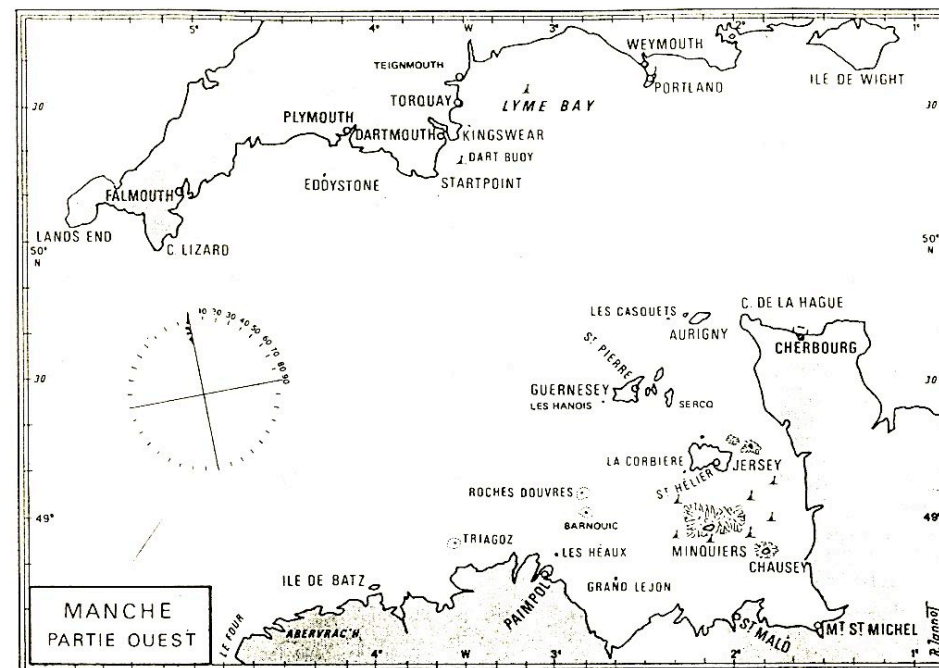
The Four M.T.B.s awarded the Ordre de l'Armée.

As a result of this action all four boats had the Ordre de L'Armée conferred on them by Général de Gaulle. This is a French decoration for bravery awarded to a ship. There is no equivalent award in the British Navy.

A similar sortie in the same area took place on the 13th May. On this occasion the Germans were waiting for them. The Flotilla had damaged a small patrol vessel with gunfire just outside the port, when a superior force of enemy vessels attacked. Only by weaving and dodging at maximum speed were the boats able to make their escape.

A Battle off la Corbière, 19th May 1944.

A week later on the evening of 19th May four boats were despatched to a spot 6 miles west of la Corbière. Information received indicated that three German M.T.B.s had left Brest on passage to Cherbourg and were likely to pass this spot. The instructions were that the 23rd was to lie in ambush for them. They were also instructed to ignore all other vessels until 0300 hrs: after which any



Map: Operational area of the 23rd Flotilla.

targets would be of their own choosing. The four boats split into two pairs and waited. At about 0130 hrs. the radar operators reported echoes from four ships about 4000 metres to the south, two small and two large, all apparently stationary. At 0215 hrs. two German E boats passed only 200 metres away from the silent flotilla and failed to spot them. Finally 0300 hrs arrived and as the targets had failed to appear M.T.B.s 90 and 96 felt free to investigate the radar echoes. This they did at slow speed, and eventually came across two trawlers and two smaller craft. When the range had closed to 700 metres, 96 was spotted by the enemy and fired on. She crossed ahead of 90, making smoke as she did so to mask her intentions. 90 emerged from the smoke firing her torpedoes. One was seen to hit a trawler between the mast and bridge. The second trawler opened fire without finding its target and was itself brought under fire from the guns of 90 which effectively silenced it. Both boats left the scene leaving behind a burning wreck. Many rescue lights from the crews' lifejackets were observed in the water. After this engagement it was the turn of M.T.B. 90 to be awarded the Ordre de l'Armée by Général de Gaulle.

The "Suicide Run."

In company with other Flotillas, the 23rd engaged the enemy in the Channel and off the coast of France continually. Many actions took place around the Channel Islands where the natural elements were as daunting as the enemy, with treacherous rocks and sluicing tides to contend with. At the time Lt. Cdr. Tom Cartwright, senior officer of a British M.G.B. Flotilla based at Dartmouth, observed: "to play anywhere round the Minquiers at night would have been thought the height of folly in peacetime, unless you were a native." And yet, the Minquiers was where they often did play. Such was their success that the Germans referred to this area as the "suicide run."

The Allied Invasion of France: D-Day, 6th June 1944.

In June 1944 the Flotilla covered the western area of the invasion fleet at the Normandy landings, and enforced the blockade of Brest. They were the first Allied ships to enter Brest. However, they were still based in Kingswear, and continued their operations as before.

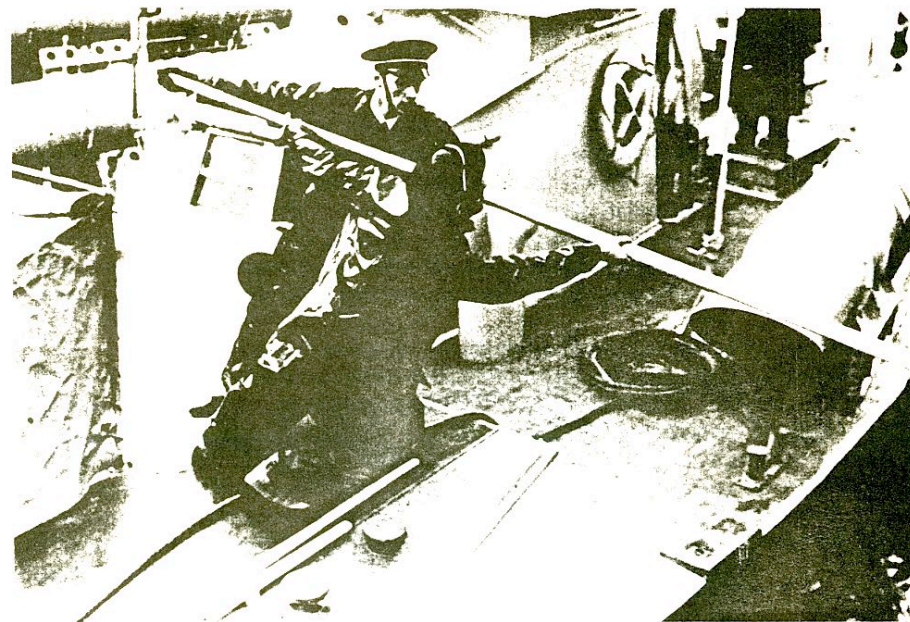
Philippe de Gaulle.

nm, le 10 Mars 43

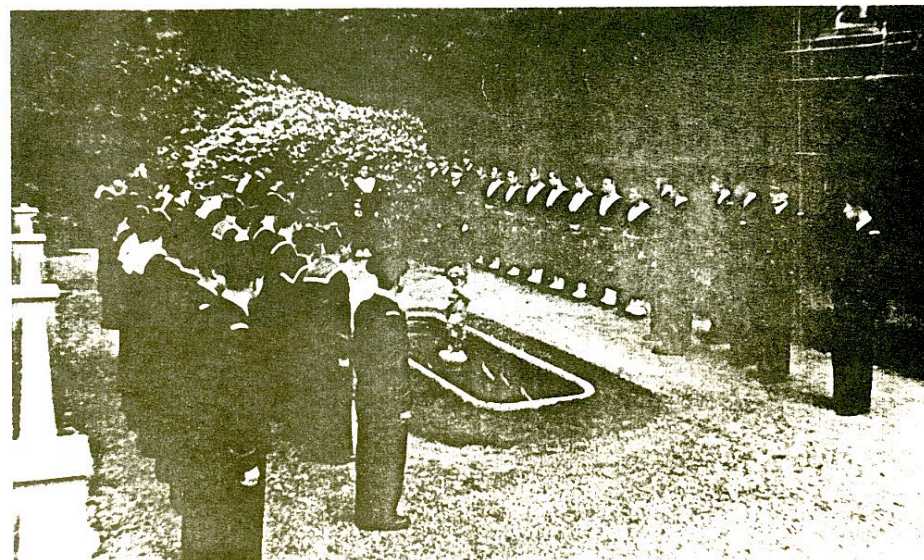
nm In one encounter, precise date unknown but it is thought to be 10th ~~June~~ *nm*, 96 was attacked and 100 shell and bullet holes punctured her hull. It was in this engagement that the British L.O. Flynn was seriously injured. Leading Seaman Marce was also badly wounded and the Skipper Lt. Bourcey slightly wounded. The 2nd i/c of this boat was Philippe de Gaulle, son of Général de Gaulle. He was also wounded in an engagement, but whether this was in 96 or in another boat is not known. Philippe retired fairly recently as the Inspecteur-Général of the French Military Forces.

Attack near the Minquiers, 23rd June 1944.

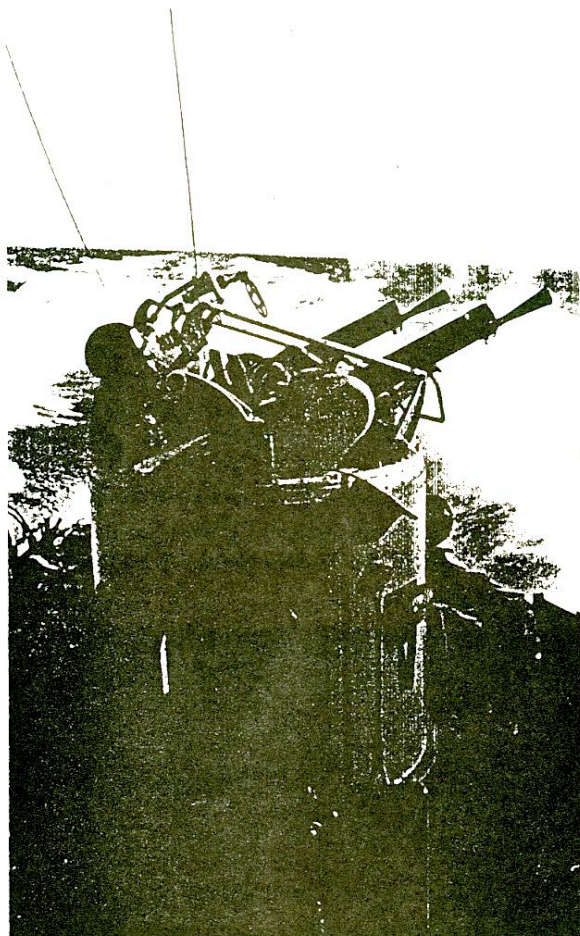
A further action took place on the 23rd June between Jersey and the Minquiers when a group of enemy vessels were spotted. They were considered too small to warrant the use of torpedoes and it was decided to mount an attack with guns. At a range of less than 600 metres a small coaster of approximately 150 tons was selected as the target. This vessel actually commenced firing first with a



Aspirant Philippe de Gaulle, son of Général de Gaulle, lends a hand to push off one of the vessels of the 23rd Flotilla.



The 23rd on parade at Brookhill.



Machine gun turret, M.T.B. 96.

machine gun which was soon silenced by the M.T.B.s. Intense counter fire from the escorts and from land based guns some of which had a calibre of 40mm soon drove the attackers off. Before leaving it was observed that the bridge of the coaster was well alight and was suffering a double misfortune as some of the enemy fire was being mistakenly directed at it. The 23rd took a number of hits but fortunately without casualties. One telegraphist was particularly lucky, when a 20mm shell shaved his head and buried itself in his radio set.

Not all successful sorties involved the discharge of weapons. On the 4th July at 0400 hrs. and after an uneventful night 94 prepared to return to Kingswear. Before doing so however it was decided to stake their claim to the area. An agile young officer clambered on to the N.E. Minquiers Buoy and planted the flag of the Cross of Lorraine. This was then repeated on the N.W. Buoy. There was a strong swell at the time but he managed to complete the task, finally regaining the safety of his boat liberally covered in red lead. Back in Dartmouth this foray was greeted with much hilarity and thereafter all Coastal Forces vessels regularly reported back on how the flags were faring.

A Narrow Escape, 19th July 1944.

The 23rd were extremely lucky on the 19th July in avoiding what could have been a disaster. Six boats were returning from a patrol in the St. Malo area, travelling at slow speed to provide protection to 239 which had lost one of its screws. Suddenly large columns of water spouted around them. Six German M-Class minesweepers emerged from a fog bank firing all weapons from 105mm to 20mm. A great deal of manoeuvring and diversionary tactics were required to extricate the Flotilla, and in particular M.T.B. 239. The engagement lasted for 45 minutes before they managed to escape from this rather unpleasant situation. A number of sailors were wounded. These were transferred to 90 which left the group and steamed back to Kingswear at maximum speed.

Much damage was sustained by the Flotilla and, during their stay in Kingswear, all vessels were repaired at some time in local boatyards. Major repairs were carried out on 96 and 227 at Teignmouth, 90 at Portsmouth, 91 at Poole, 239 at Falmouth, 92 at ~~Portland~~, and 94 and 98 at Fowey.

FOWEY

Back home in France, August 1944.

In August the Flotilla were based temporarily at L'Aber-Wrac'h in Brittany. The crews of the 23rd, many of whom had not set foot in their homeland for almost four years, received a rapturous welcome from the Bretons and from their own families, as a goodly number of the 23rd came from this area.

Farewell to Kingswear, 25th September 1944.

Wherever the French sailors were quartered during their stay on the coast, good relations were established with the local communities, many such friendships enduring to the present day. Certainly a number of marriages took place. The 23rd Flotilla returned to Kingswear for the last time on the 25th September 1944. Two days later they left for Newhaven. Leaving the Dart, the boats were dressed overall with the Cross of Lorraine banner waving from their masts. It was a momentous farewell with all boats firing rockets and flares as a gesture of thanks for their hosts of the past twenty months.

Although the boats had left, with the exception of a few guards left behind, all crews returned to Kingswear 48 hours later. This was to attend a farewell evening in the village hall. The hall was decorated with flags, the girls danced with the crews wearing the pomponned caps of their partners and a good time was had by all. The evening concluded with the singing of the Marseillaise and God Save the King.

The Last Engagement in the ^{Perthuis (Between Le Rochellais - Rochefort Ile de Re et Ile d'Oléron)} Channel, May 1945. ^{M.T.B. 91-92-233}

Later the Flotilla were based at Bénodet and Rochefort, from where they carried out the last naval engagement of the war in the Channel. On the night of the 2nd May 1945 they shot up a German trawler, and two nights later fired their torpedoes at four other trawlers. In these engagements, after the Flotilla had left Kingswear, a number of German Navy and Army prisoners were taken.

Achievements and Decorations.

The 23rd Flotilla carried out 451 patrols which included 128 "war operations". They sank five German ships totalling 7000 tons and damaged many more. The success of their operations resulted in the award of the following

decorations to the crews: 1 D.S.O., 5 D.S.C.s, 2 D.S.M.s, 6 M.I.D.s, one Croix d'Officier de la Légion d'Honneur, 3 Médailles Militaires and 85 Croix de Guerre. Throughout the war the combined Coastal Forces fought 464 actions, resulting in the sinking of 269 enemy vessels and suffering the loss of 76 of their own.

Post-War Anglo-French Links.

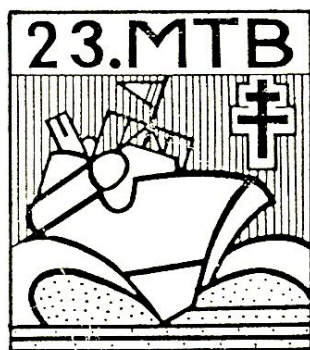
All ranks of the 23rd Flotilla, both French and British, have an Association which maintains the strong bonds of friendship that were formed under the most difficult conditions so long ago. In 1982 the Association paid a visit to Kingswear and Dartmouth, where a reception was held in the Guildhall. It is hoped that a further reunion will be arranged in 1993 to commemorate the date of their arrival in Kingswear half a century before.

In 1991, to celebrate 50 years of the Free French presence in the River Dart and, in particular the 23rd Flotilla, the Parish Council invited a French warship to pay a visit between the 18th/21st June. Originally this was to be the *La Combattante*, a fast patrol vessel with a displacement of 180 tons and carrying a crew of 13. Her predecessor was a regular visitor to the Dart during the war. She was a Hunt Class destroyer, a much larger vessel, originally H.M.S. *Haldon* before being transferred to the Free French Navy and renamed *La Combattante*. After a distinguished war record, she was mined off the East Dudgeon Buoy on the 23rd February 1945 when 66 crew members died. Unfortunately, the *La Combattante* experienced a mechanical failure and a replacement vessel, the *Cérès*, was sent.

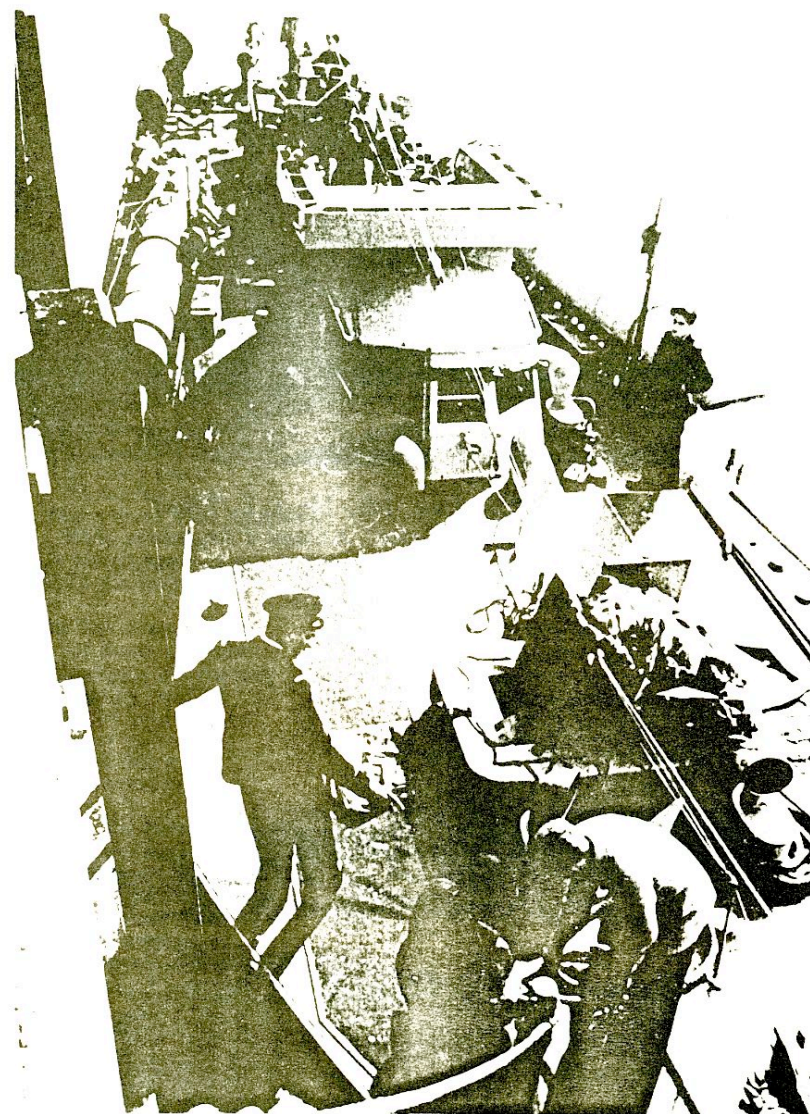
On the morning of the 18th June, the French Minehunter *Cérès* entered the River Dart. She is a modern vessel, 160 feet in length and carrying a crew of 5 officers and 50 sailors. The vessel tied up to a buoy opposite the public pier. At 11.15 a.m. the Captain and representatives of the crew were welcomed ashore by a party of local dignitaries. The Chairman of the Parish Council, Major Dick Parkes, made an official speech of welcome in fluent French. After the Captain of the *Cérès* had made a suitable reply, the assembled throng repaired to the Royal Dart Yacht Club for an informal reception. At the Club, a small exhibition of mementoes of the 23rd Flotilla had been mounted which aroused much interest from the visitors. A programme for the crew had been arranged which included visits to places of local interest, a reception at the Royal Naval College, a visit to

the local school and other events which we trust were satisfactory to our guests. The *Cérès* was open to the public for the duration of the visit and many people from Kingswear enjoyed the hospitality of the officers and crew.

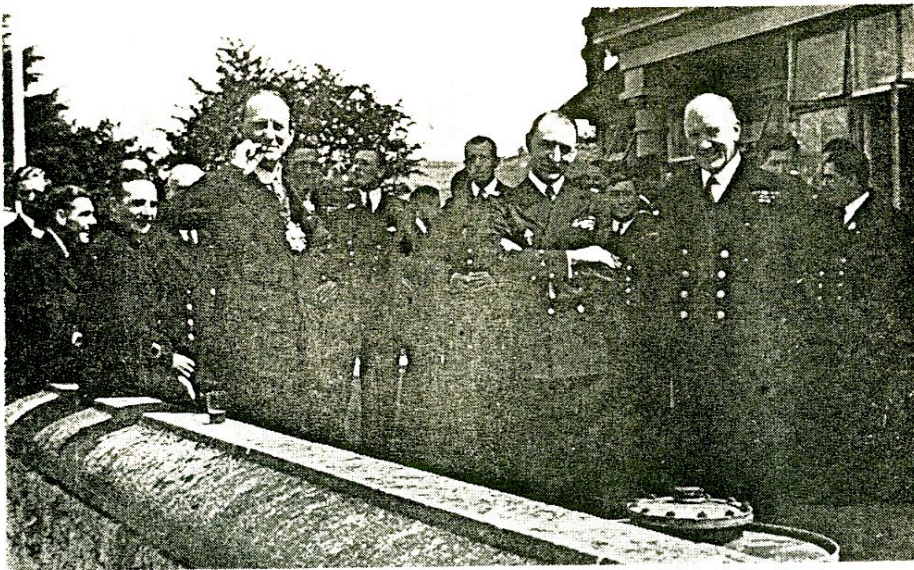
This was not the end of the village's association with the French navy or indeed the vessel *La Combattante*. Both this ship and the French naval tug the *Lutteur*, arrived for a short stay in Kingswear on the 26th August 1992. Both vessels were under the command of Colonel Henri Petit, the Commandant of the Maritime Gendarmerie. The crews of these vessels joined in the spirit of the Dartmouth Royal Regatta by entering teams for a number of events. There was also an official ceremony held at Brookhill, the previous H.Q. of the 23rd Flotilla. On behalf of the French Ministry of Defence, Ensign Tarreau presented a Cross of Lorraine flag to the people of Kingswear. In return a painting of the village by local artist John Gillo was presented to the *La Combattante*. The flag was framed and on the 8th of November, after being blessed in the village church, was hung in the Trust Rooms alongside many more mementoes of the 23rd Flotilla, who had been our welcome guests almost half a century ago.



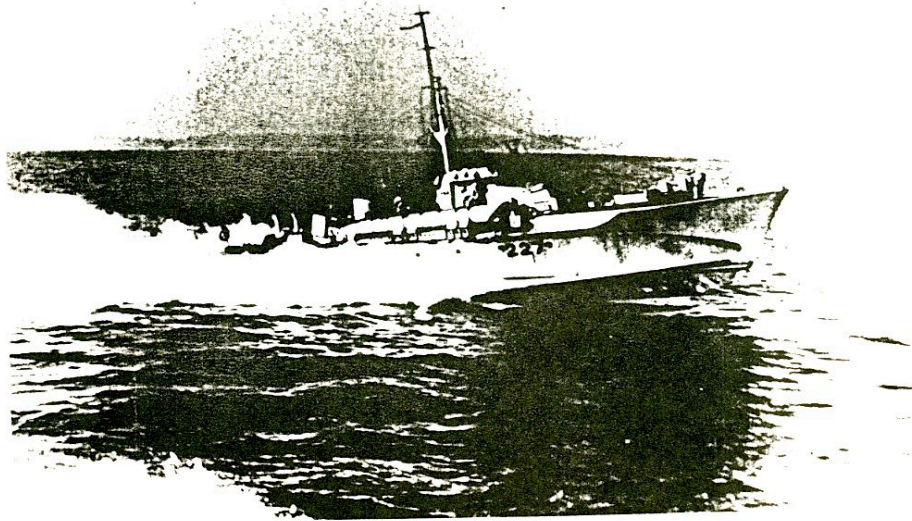
Badge of the 23rd Flotilla.



Deck of one of M.T.B.s of 23rd Flotilla loaded with torpedoes at Kingswear.



Cocktails on the terrace at Longford: left, Mr. C.E. Turner, Chairman of the Parish Council; centre, Admiral d'Argenlieu, Free French Navy; right, Admiral A.C. Strutt C.B.E., R.N., Officer Commanding Dartmouth.



M.T.B. 227 loaded with torpedoes off the Devon coast.

AND NEVER KNOW WHO WILL COME HOME.

Written in 1943 by British Wren Officer Moyra Charlton as a tribute to the 23rd Flotilla.

This is the gold
Enchanted hour.
The evening, when
Syringas flower.
The castle dark
Against the sea
Is woven from
A fantasy.

The hills close 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 *in*
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 the 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 M.T.B.s
Come back from France
And we will search
The mist to trace
If each is in
Her wonted place;

Knowing the boys
Red-eyed and worn,
Have braced their courage
With the dawn
To bring them in
With throttles loud
And pendants 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.

Sources and Acknowledgments.

The above account is far from complete, but hopefully it will fill a gap in the Parish records and may one day form the basis for further research. Every effort has been made to ensure authenticity but, with fading memories and sources of information which were sometimes contradictory, it has been necessary to use some discretion.

My grateful thanks are extended to the following:- Sir David Clayton, who initially aroused my interest in this subject; Mr. Geoffrey Hudson, the historian of the Coastal Forces Association, for information provided; Mr. Bob Fletcher Lieut. R.N.V.R. (Rtd.) who coincidentally is writing a similar history and who readily agreed to pool our information; Monsieur René Leballeur (M.M.), a former member of the 23rd Flotilla for his invaluable help and for the supply of photographs; Mr. John Hatfield, Lieut. R.N.V.R. (Rtd), a former L.O. with the 23rd, for providing much information and for correcting my many mistakes; Mr. Richard Webb for providing a number of documents; Mrs Ray Freeman for politely coercing me to complete the project so that it could be produced in printed form; and many others too numerous to mention. And finally, my wife Marie, without whose command of the French language this brief narrative could not have been written.

Tony Higgins, Kingswear, 1992