



# OPERATION CHARIOT

## The Raid on St. Nazaire

By Mark Seaman

The year 1942 marked an abrupt change in the course of the "Battle of the Atlantic". The entry of the United States into the world-wide war held much promise for eventual relief from some of the burden shouldered by Great Britain, even though it would be some time before that promise could be translated into material gain. It was true that the U-boats were now carrying the war into the Western Atlantic with seeming impunity, but events were evolving that would remove from the Atlantic convoy lanes the threat of large-scale surface action by the German fleet—no mean accomplishment for the Allies.

Although forbidden to engage in equal combat by the German high command (for fear of losing what few capital ships they had), the surface raiders had already made an impact on the Allies' merchant fleets. The year 1941 saw the end of successful voyages by the battleship *Admiral Scheer* and the battlecruisers *Scharnhorst* and *Gniesau*, and the dramatic breakout of the battleship *Bismarck*. The cruise of that 45000-ton monster threw a scare into the British Admiralty (especially after the loss of the *Hood*) and most realized that they had been extremely lucky to sink her.

As 1942 opened, the British command was aware that a second Bismarck-class ship had been completed, and priority was given to keeping this one off the convoy lanes. This was brought to the attention of Combined Operations, which had been organized to carry the war to the enemy through offensive means, limited as they might be following Dunkirk. In early 1941 commando forces had been organized with the intention of operating against select targets along a coastline that stretched from the Arctic to the Pyrenees. The first raids, small affairs, were mounted that same summer. In August 1941, the port of St. Nazaire was first proposed as a target, considered and rejected by Ad-

miral Keyes, head of Combined Operations. Now, Lord Mountbatten, the new head, was asked to consider the port as a target once more.

In St. Nazaire was the only drydock large enough to accommodate a vessel the size of the battleship *Tirpitz*, sister to the *Bismarck*. This dock had been constructed for the building of the great French liner, the *Normandie* (which took four years to complete). It could easily handle ships up to 85000 tons, being over 1100 feet long and 164 feet wide. The lock gates were two huge sliding caissons 167 feet long and 35 feet thick. The caissons were moved on cambers with the motive machinery in winding houses at the end of each camber track. A pump house near the southern end of the dock housed the machinery for filling and emptying the dock.

The British commanders reasoned that the destruction of the Normandie dock might well prevent the *Tirpitz* from ever venturing into the Atlantic. If she was damaged in combat, it would be to St. Nazaire she must steam for repairs (it was to St. Nazaire the *Bismarck* had been fleeing the previous year). The Germans had thus far shown inordinate caution in the use of their capital ships. Without the dock, it was unlikely the *Tirpitz* would sail for the convoy lanes.

But the port offered other targets that made the prospect of a raid attractive. The Germans had based U-boats at St. Nazaire and were building huge bombproof shelters to protect them from the RAF. Some of these pens were already complete and in use. The pens themselves would be too formidable for commandos, but some of the submarines might be disabled, as well as equipment and stores. More vulnerable were the lock gates that controlled the tidal action in the port basins. If these could be destroyed, the harbor would be tidal and this would, at the very least, inconvenience the U-boats. There were also bridges, power plants, and gun positions

that could be knocked out, as well as a group of underground fuel storage tanks. Close examination of the map shows that destruction of but a relatively few locks and swing bridges would at least impair the operation of the port as a whole by isolating areas of St. Nazaire. And there would inevitably be the propaganda value of a successful raid to consider. Eventually, the list of targets for the operation numbered 24 entries.

### THE PLAN

By the end of January 1942, the French port was officially tagged as a Combined Operations target of highest priority and planning was underway. Two officers, Captain William Pritchard and Captain Robert Montgomery, had worked out a plan for a raid on the port the previous year. They were brought into the staff almost immediately. Much of the relevant data was in hand, with the destruction of the Normandie dock caissons the prime objective.

The idea of ramming a ship into the southern caisson and blowing it up evolved rather quickly when it became obvious that laying the charges on such a massive target by hand would be too difficult. The planning staff originally called for the use of two destroyers, one for the actual ramming attempt and one to withdraw landed commandos. The Admiralty balked at the idea of two destroyers being risked (since they were in short supply and the U-boat war was intense), and only grudgingly assented to part with one when shown that nothing smaller would survive the impact with the massive caisson. The vessel finally chosen to be sacrificed was one of the fifty Lend-Lease destroyers from the United States, the former USS *Buchanan*, now the HMS *Campbeltown*.

Unable to acquire a second destroyer, the planners settled on using a number of motor launches to carry

in the balance of the commandos, provide covering fire for them, and withdraw the raiding force at the conclusion of the operation. These were Fairmile Type B MLs, 112 feet in length and 18 feet across, displacing some 65 tons. They had a top speed of about 20 knots and were armed with twin 20mm Oerlikons. They were crewed by two officers and ten ratings, and would carry an additional 15 commandos each.

A Fairmile C Motor Gun Boat (MGB 314) and a motor torpedo boat (MTB 74) were added. The MGB was considerably faster than the other MLs, with three 850-hp engines, and more heavily armed with a 2-lber. and twin machine guns amidships; she was to be the headquarters ship for Ryder and Newman. MTB 74 was a strange craft, commanded by Sub-Lt. Micky Wynn. It had been adapted for a special mission against the battlecruiser *Scharnhorst* at Brest. The torpedo tubes were mounted far forward to launch the torpedoes over anti-torpedo nets. Special delayed-action fuses would then detonate the warheads under the target in the hopes of breaking her back. When the German ships dashed home through the Channel in February, MTB 74 was a boat without a mission, so she was added to "Operation Chariot". It was felt that Wynn could act as back-up against the dock in case the *Campbeltown* failed to ram the caisson. Four further MLs, each equipped with torpedoes, were later added to the naval force to operate against targets of opportunity.

Commanders of the raiding force were chosen with care. Lt.-Colonel A.C. Newman was placed in charge of the ground force. A veteran officer from the Essex Regiment, he had been in command of No. 2 Commando for most of 1941. Command of the naval forces was given to Commander R.E.D. Ryder. He had already served a colorful career, and was presently between commands. Ordered to attend a conference on 26 February, he did so and accepted the command before knowing what it was about. Newman only enlightened him after the conference was over.

The demolition parties were made up of hand-picked volunteers from across the ranks of the 12 Commandos, while the fighting troops (the protection parties) came from Newman's own No. 2. They were all given intensive training in dockyard demolitions and in nighttime street fighting. Under the guidance of Captain Pritchard, the demolition teams practiced until they could set their charges blindfolded. They practiced with varying numbers of "casualties" so that all would be proficient, learned what parts of the equipment of their targets were most vital, and even trained in the use of axes and sledge hammers for the destruction of sensitive parts.

Meanwhile, on 10 March, the HMS *Campbeltown* arrived at the Devonport dockyard for modification. The ship was lightened severely to reduce her draft, much of her armament being removed. Two of the four stacks were also removed and the others cut at a rakish angle to give her the appearance of a German destroyer. Quarter-inch armor plate was erected around the bridge and along the decks for protection against the anticipated heavy small arms fire, and eight Oerlikons were installed for reply. One of her 12-lbers. was retained and mounted forward.

The trickiest part of the conversion was placement of the explosive charges for the demolition of the caisson. Captain Pritchard and Lieutenant Tibbets finally solved the dilemma after some experimentation. The charge, composed of 24 naval depth charges, was encased in a steel tank and placed over fuel compartments just aft of the support for the forward gun. It was then covered with concrete. The 24 charges were linked with instantaneous cordtex fuse, which was in turn linked to two separate delayed action fuses. Scuttling charges were

also placed in the stern so she could be sunk, fast against the caisson after ramming it.

All this work was completed in nine days. Her draft had been reduced by about three feet, but the planners were still worried about her passage over the mud flats of the Loire estuary. As the commando training progressed, the naval force gathered at Falmouth. The small boats began arriving on 14 March. The two escorting destroyers, *Atherstone* and *Tynedale*, arrived on the 23rd, while *Campbeltown* came in two days later. A phony cover was given the naval force in the interest of security. The 10th Anti-Submarine Striking Force became Chariot's naval designation for the benefit of enemy intelligence.

A final dress rehearsal was held on 22 March—codenamed "Operation Vivid". It was rated a failure, but the participants had learned a number of lessons. The biggest problem was found to be the glare of harbor searchlights which impeded navigation, station keeping and the landing of the troops. Unfortunately, it was to be a problem without a solution.

The defenses of the French port were formidable. In fact they were strong enough to encourage the German defenders to think that a raid against them was truly impossible. Shore batteries with guns up to 170mm lined both sides of the estuary, while searchlights and automatic weapons from 20mm to 40mm covered the approaches to the harbor. There were 43 of these weapons in or around the town itself. There were also four harbor defense boats and ten vessels from two German minesweeping flotillas based in the harbor. The Germans had some 6000 men stationed in the area, including a brigade of the 333rd Infantry Division a few miles inland. It seemed a most secure establishment, but Donitz inspected it anyway just prior to the raid pursuant to a Fuhrer Directive warning of the possibility of limited British attacks from the sea. He found the local command confident that such a thing could not happen at St. Nazaire, unaware that the "10th Anti-Submarine Striking Force" had already put to sea.

## THE VOYAGE

Scheduled to depart on the 27th of March, "Chariot" left a day early at the advice of Ryder. The night before, air reconnaissance photos showed four destroyers of the Wolf/Mowe-class in the harbor of St. Nazaire, but this couldn't alter their plans. The Admiralty did decide to send a further two destroyers for escort. Cover for the attack was to be an air raid laid on by the RAF. The planners of Chariot had wanted a full-scale air attack to keep the Germans busy, but political considerations caused Churchill to place restrictions on the bomber crews, allowing them to release their loads only if they could clearly see their targets. Churchill was afraid that any indiscriminate raid might injure relations with the French. Due to security demands, the bomber crews were not informed of the reason for the air raid. (Many of the pilots expressed great despair upon discovering the true nature of the operation after their air raid. Had they known they were supporting British soldiers fighting for their lives, they would certainly have pressed home their attacks with greater determination.)

Despite uncertainties, the executive order to launch Operation Chariot arrived at Falmouth at 12:30 PM of March 26. By 2:00 PM, the force had cleared Falmouth harbor. Excepting the escorts, the combined force numbered 611 officers and men.

The voyage out was quiet for the most part, only two incidents occurred to disrupt the routine. The first involved an encounter with the U-593, which was driven off by the *Tynedale*. The U-boat sent out an erroneous message concerning the heading of the force, which only served to further mislead the Germans. A French fishing fleet was also encountered, and two of the French vessels were

sunk at Ryder's command (after the crews had been taken aboard the escorting British destroyers). The French, happy to be of aid to the British, convinced Ryder that there were no German intelligence agents in the remainder of the fishing fleet, and the commander ordered no more sunk. (Several of the Frenchmen taken aboard remained with the force to join the Free French upon their return to England.)

By the late afternoon on the 27th, the sky became overcast—which would lessen the dangers from enemy aerial reconnaissance. But there were disturbing reports from Plymouth of the movement of the German destroyers at St. Nazaire. These vessels were, in fact, putting to sea in response to the sighting report from U-593.

These concerns were not shared by the men of the commandos. They spent much of their time cleaning and checking their gear. They shared anti-aircraft watches with the naval ratings, and practiced with the Oerlikons and Lewis guns. Even though they had been together for a very short time, the commandos and naval personnel were unifying into a cohesive fighting force; sharing in this adventure seemed to have fostered a rare kinship. Aboard the *Campbeltown*, the men had things even better. Part way through the voyage they were informed that the destroyer would not be coming back; and thus, there was no sense in letting her considerable stores go to waste, or worse to the Germans. Up to that point, all had duly paid for what they took from the ship canteen; now it was decided there was little point to this practice, and everything was declared "on the house". Since the need for security had been so important, *Campbeltown* had been fully stocked and there was more than enough for everyone.

One ML, commanded by Lt. Briault, suffered engine trouble. The commandos were transferred to Falconar's ML (one of the extra boats). Falconar managed to catch up with the Chariot force before the final run-in, but Briault was unable to repair his engine until 10:20 PM, too late to catch up. He returned to port without trouble.

At 8:00 PM on the 27th, Ryder ordered the flotilla into attack formation. Ryder and Newman took their positions on the MGB and her commander, Lt. Curtis, took 314 to the head of the line. Two hours later, they found the British submarine *Sturgeon* at her navigation station exactly on schedule. They had but forty miles to go. At 11:30, the men could see the RAF bombers going into action over the port. The cloud cover that Ryder was grateful for proved to hamper the efforts of the British airmen. The German searchlights could be seen through the murk, but the bomb explosions were coming in single, spaced bursts and the crews struggled to identify their targets through the overcast.

The British entered the Loire estuary about 12:30 AM, still undetected. Fifteen minutes later, the lookouts sighted land—the northern shore—which meant they were now among the dangerous shoal waters. Ryder cut speed to ten knots, to keep the destroyer as high in the water as possible.

The air raid had caused some confusion among the German defenders, but its abnormal pattern and general lack of aggressiveness did more to alert them than an ordinary raid. The anti-aircraft brigade commander, Captain Mecke, quickly surmised that the raid might be a diversion. At midnight he sent a warning to all Wehrmacht command posts in the region to beware of parachute landings. By 1:00, most of the airplanes had departed, and the few remaining were milling about beyond the range of his guns. He ordered the searchlights doused, but also ordered a "continued and increased alert" with strange for AA troops, the addition "to direct special attention seaward."

The British force navigator, one Lt. A.R. Green, put in a flawless performance. The *Campbeltown*

had eased over the mud flats (even though she grounded twice, reducing her speed to five knots), and passed the old Les Morees tower at about 1:20. One of the German harbor defense boats patrolling the main channel did spot the enemy force, but without a radio was powerless to warn anybody. A German AA battalion commander had sighted the approaching vessels five minutes before, but his initial call to the harbor commander's HQ was rebuffed. His next call to Mecke was not, and at 1:20 Mecke sent out the code message ordering all commands in the area to "repel invasion".

It was now time for Leading Seaman Pike to play out his much-practiced role. Sent along by the Admiralty for his knowledge of German signals, his task was to delay German reaction to the approach as long as possible. At this stage, minutes were precious. The British had obtained the Morse name for one of the German E-boats in the area and at 1:22, when the first searchlights came on, Pike went into action. The problem however was that the British were challenged by two enemy stations at once, one from Villes Martin on the port beam and one from the German *Sperrbrecher* ahead. A few shore positions manned by nervous German crews operating under Mecke's order also opened fire. Ryder ordered Pike to answer the shore station first. The signal was accepted, and the firing ceased. But Pike had had to cut short his message and deal with the *Sperrbrecher*. Some searchlights were still on spotlighting the little fleet, and firing from some German positions began again as Pike was flashing the German ship. He immediately switched to the German signal for "ship being fired on by friendly forces", and firing again ceased. Several minutes had been won.

But the bluff was up—for if they had truly been German ships, the boats' commanders would have halted when fired upon. Instead, Beattie now brought *Campbeltown* up to speed for the charge at the caisson. As the Germans opened fire on the accelerating destroyer at 1:28, Ryder played his last card by firing his Very pistol—loaded with what British intelligence believed to be the correct German recognition flare. But it was the wrong kind, rose only a few feet, and fell into the water. Worse, it was the wrong shade of red. On *Campbeltown*, the German flag came down and the British naval ensign went up. It also broke out on the stern of all the other little boats, and all of the guns of Chariot opened fire at the shore.

**THE RAID**

The ferocity of the British reply caused a temporary slackening of the German fire and put out some of the searchlights. The MGB silenced the 88mm gun on the *Sperrbrecher*. While several had been hit, none of the British boats—including the *Campbeltown* which got most of the attention—were mortally hit.

But now casualties started to mount as more German guns joined in, and the flotilla neared the docks. On the destroyer, two Oerlikons and the forward gun were knocked out. Beattie found the light house on the Old Mole (Area 342) and used it to orient for the final run to the Normandie dock. The MGB sheared away as the destroyer went to 20 knots. At 200 yards, Beattie spotted the black line of the top of the caisson. An incendiary bomb (possibly from one of the few remaining British aircraft overhead) struck and exploded on the forecandle seconds before impact. Beattie ordered the crew to prepare for impact, felt the momentary check as the ship tore through the torpedo nets, and ordered a final change of "Port Twenty!" to hit the caisson dead center and keep the stern from the blocking the Old Entrance. At 1:34 the *Campbeltown* struck the caisson, crumpling her lower bows back some 34 feet and leaving the forecandle deck projecting

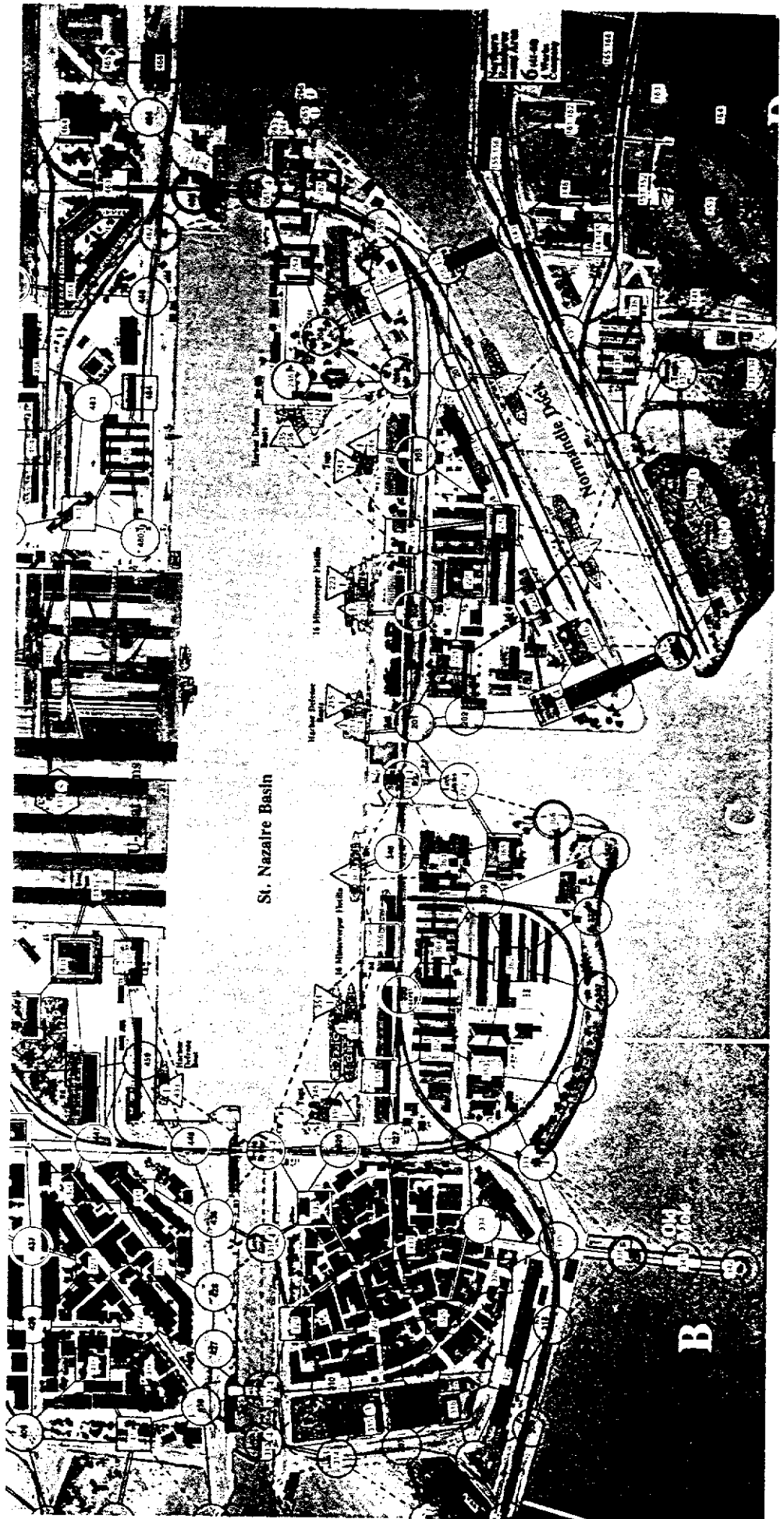


Figure 1: The Scene of the Action

a foot beyond the caisson's inner face. The commandos did not give the order to abandon ship to his naval personnel until the commandos had all disembarked. Then Chief Engine-Room Artificers Howard and Reay opened the sea valves and removed the condenser doors to let in the water. As insurance, Torpedo Gunner Hargreaves set off scuttling charges, and the *Campbeltown* began to settle by the stern with her bows held fast on the caisson. The crew were taken off by the boats of Curtis and Rodier.

(This is the critical aspect of the mission: to destroy the caissons of the dock and, in the game, these are where the largest single VP block can be earned. The ramming is straightforward, but losing speed and failing to scuttle may hurt the chances of getting full value for the Southern Caisson. The Northern Caisson—256—must be the prime target for the *Campbeltown*'s commandos since its destruction, along with that of the southern one, will yield more than a third of the points a player needs to win.)

Tibbets and Copeland, Newman's second-in-command, directed the landing from the destroyer, accomplished under a hail of fire from German batteries. Roderick's assault party left first to silence nearby gun positions and establish a defensive perimeter for the demolition squads. Roy's assault team attacked and destroyed the gun positions atop the pumping station, and then moved on to the bridge over the Old Entrance (211). All the practice by the demolition groups proved important and they functioned well, despite casualties and confusion.

Chant, with one of his men wounded, blew open the doors of the pump house (222) and headed for the main pumps below ground; 150 pounds of explosive destroyed the pumps and collapsed the floor above, saving them the need to deal with the electric motors on the ground floor. They completed the destruction by smashing gauges and instruments with hammers and setting the transformer oil afire.

Christopher Smalley's target, the winding house (216) was the nearest to the *Campbeltown* and he made short work of it. Charges were set on the two great wheels that moved the caisson; when the fuses failed, he calmly set new charges and was rewarded with the complete destruction of the building. Seeing Burt's launch at the Old Entrance, he led his men to it and embarked, even though the boat was at the time trading fire with enemy vessels in the St. Nazaire Basin. Smalley himself was killed while trying to unjam the ML's Oerlikons.

Brett, Purdon and the reinforcing Burtenshaw had a much tougher time at the northern end of the great dock. Their protection squad had been halved while still aboard the destroyer and only its leader Dienson and two of his men remained. Despite this, all ran for the northern targets. Reaching the northern winding station (253), Purdon smashed open the door and set charges much as Smalley had, and then waited for Brett and Burtenshaw to complete their work on the caisson (256) itself. Brett was wounded early on, but continued to advise the others. The commandos laid underwater charges against the face of the caisson by hanging them from a railing along the north side. But fire had picked up and a number (including Burtenshaw) were killed. Retreating, Sergeant Carr fired the charges and the caisson was damaged, but not destroyed. Purdon fired his charges, and together the remaining commandos retreated toward the bridge Roy held over the Old Entrance.

The destruction of the dockyard machinery was so complete that, even if the *Campbeltown* charge failed, the Normandie dock would be completely unusable for at least a full year. But reaching the bridge, the commandos found the bridge under fire and could only be crossed with great risk. Newman's headquarters was on the other side. Under

fire, all crossed to meet with him and inquire about evacuation. It was only then that they became aware of the carnage on the river.

After the *Campbeltown* had rammed the caisson, the MLs began to come up—the port column headed for the Old Mole (336) and the starboard column making for the Old Entrance (366). Shortly after the destroyer had rammed, Curtis' MGB moved into the confined spaces of the Old Entrance. In this enclosed area, Ryder was unaware of the fate of the little boats.

The MLs began to take heavy fire even before the destroyer ended her voyage on the Southern Caisson. And it began to tell immediately, with boat after boat being hit repeatedly. ML 192, the lead boat of the starboard column commanded by Stephens, never reached the Mole and was abandoned aflame with casualties aboard. Burt's boat overshot the Old Entrance, came about, and put his commandos ashore. Rodier's boat, third in line, was already there. But fire was heavy, and Morgan's and Woodcock's groups reembarked, asking to be put ashore on the downstream side. Total confusion now reigned. Lt. Beart's ML 267 also overshot the Old Entrance, came about, landed the commandos, reembarked them when the fire was found too intense, and then savaged by fire before it could withdraw. Burning, it too was abandoned.

ML 268 was the first boat in the column to make the Old Entrance approach as planned, but came under accurate fire and exploded astern of the *Campbeltown*. Fenton, in the fifth boat of the group, managed to avoid the drifting and burning vessels of his compatriots and made the Old Entrance, there landing Hooper's assault party. But now, with severe damage to the engines, he tried to withdraw. Being one of the four torpedo boats, he attempted to torpedo the *Sperrbrecher*, but after one run abandoned the attempt and withdrew to the open sea. Rodier, likewise, gained the Old Entrance despite the holocaust to land Haines' party. He then tied to the *Campbeltown*, taking off the naval personnel and retraced his course through the German fire to the open sea.

The other spare ML, under Lt. Nock, found its way to the Old Entrance, arriving in time to witness the destruction on the river at its height. He spent some time engaging enemy guns with the Oerlikons, but could locate no survivors to evacuate. Withdrawing, his ML 298 was badly hit, both engines exploded, and the boat was abandoned. Meanwhile, Burt's boat had come upon Collier's craft, which had been badly shot up. Moving to offer assistance, he was waved off by Collier—alone on the bridge and mortally wounded. But the pause had been fatal, and Burt's ML was heavily hit, engines and steering knocked out. Burt ordered all aboard to abandon ship.

(There is little the player can do about the German fire pouring into the naval force but pray and deal with developments as best can. The covering fire can help, but will rarely do much damage against the guns and searchlights. The British force is simply outgunned from the start, and is firing from fragile floating platforms against fortified gun emplacements. The Avant Port can be used to hide from the worst of the enemy fire while waiting to pick up the surviving commandos, but even here only if the guns protecting it—311, 312, 411, 434A, 434B—are silenced.)

The port column of launches was having almost as much trouble as the other, although more of these boats would eventually escape. Their landing zone, the Old Mole, remained in enemy hands throughout the night and the searchlight at its end, like the blockhouse in the middle, would remain in action. The action here was so furious that the final landing attempt was over only fifteen minutes after the destroyer had struck the caisson.

First came ML 270, but her steering was KO'ed by a direct hit and her captain, Lt. Irwin, decided he had to withdraw rather than be an easy target; she made the open sea. Lt. Platt, next in line, carrying the commandos under Birney who were to secure the Mole, apparently grounded short of the steps and came under fire from German infantry above. Trying a second approach, the boat was hit numerous times, caught fire, and drifted away burning. This brought up ML 160 under Lt. Boyd. Carrying no troops, he made himself a nuisance to the Germans along the waterfront, giving supporting fire everywhere, attempting to torpedo the *Sperrbrecher*, and eventually expended all his ammunition engaging enemy gun positions at close range. He picked up the survivors of Platt's boat and even stopped in the holocaust a second time to pick up three commandos in the water. Despite repeated hits, the boat was charmed and retired through a cascade of shells from shore batteries to the open sea.

Next in line came the aforementioned Collier, at the helm of ML 457, carrying two four-man demolition parties under Pritchard and Walton and the protection squad under Lt. Watson. Avoiding the burning boats, Collier landed his passengers, and the returned to midstream to await them—a fatal mistake. Repeatedly hit, his boat was set afire. After refusing Burt's rescue attempt, the ML exploded taking Collier and eight of his crew with it.

Of the other four launches in the port column, none were able to land their troops due to the heavy fire. Wallis, after one attempt, abandoned the landing and took his boat to the opposite shore to engage enemy gun positions there. Horlock overshot the mole, then with casualties mounting, simply found the fire too thick to make another attempt. Henderson took his ML 268 to both the Old Mole and the Old Entrance, but was unable to land at either and turned for home. Falconar took on various survivors from the water, losing all his guns to enemy fire in the process, and wisely retreated back to the open sea.

Ryder left his position at the Old Entrance around 2:30 after seeing Wynn's torpedoes fired against the lock gates (212). As Curtis brought his MGB out into the river, Ryder got his first look at the slaughter. The wrecks of five launches were still burning, and he witnessed Collier being savaged as he made his second run at the Old Mole. Ryder ordered Curtis to go to his aid. MGB 314 sailed to within 250 yards of the mole, promptly silenced the dangerous German gun in the bunker (336), and also engaged the searchlight at the end (342) and a second enemy gun inshore (344). With the boat now receiving numerous hits, Ryder determined to return to the Old Entrance to tell Newman there would be no boats to withdraw the commandos. But he found a firefight raging at the shore there, and no other craft afloat. Ryder ordered Curtis to retreat.

Of the commandos in the motor launches, few made it ashore—Newman's HQ, Haines' group, the three groups from Collier's boat and one man from Stephens'. The initial plan had been for the second destroyer to land these troops, and the destruction of the small boats after the German inability to seriously damage the *Campbeltown* proved the accuracy of the planners' predictions. With the ineffective bombing raid having insured that all the German positions were manned, even the few commandos ashore here had little hope of doing further damage. Newman had landed at 1:40 and shortly less than an hour later issued orders recalling his men. Cut off from their transport home, they would have to fight their way through the Old Town and across what came to be known to the commandos as the "Bridge of Memories" (343) into the new town, and from there hope to reach neutral Spain. (As it turned out, only five were able to complete this path and return to England; the rest either died

at St. Nazaire or became POWs the next morning.)

German reinforcements were closing in around the Old Entrance and the British now numbered less than 100 men, most of them wounded. There was no time to waste, so Newman and Copeland organized their forces into 20-man groups and moved out through the streets. Reaching the bridge they found it held by German infantry; in fact, these were some of the last naval troops around. The commandos charged the bridge and broke through. The breakout continued for another hundred yards or so, when they suddenly ran into the leading elements of the mobilized and approaching 679th Infantry Brigade. These troops were backed up by armored cars, and Newman's groups broke up into small parties. The action was over—almost.

## THE AFTERMATH

Most tried to hide. And most were routed out by the thorough German search procedures. As the commandos were captured they were brought together in a cafe for processing. The main concern among the British, needless-to-say, was whether they were far enough away from the *Campbeltown*.

As the search had been mounted, other Germans gathered at the Southern Caisson to view the great curiosity of a British destroyer perched atop the dock gate. A quick search of the ship had been undertaken but had failed to uncover the explosives. Shortly after 10:30 AM, with somewhere in the neighborhood of 100 Germans, dockyard workers and souvenir hunters aboard, the *Campbeltown* fuse ran out and detonated the charges. The caisson was blown off its track, and the inrush of water forced it back against the inner wall of the dock. The two tankers in the dock, the *Passat* and the *Schledstadt*, were carried along on the tidal wave into the inner face of the Northern Caisson. The remainder of the *Campbeltown* was carried into the dock and sank to the floor.

The blast was a tremendous shock to the Germans, and it raised tensions considerably. Shots were still being heard that night as nervous Germans fired at shadows, Frenchmen, and occasionally each other. By Sunday morning, things had calmed—only to be again unhinged by the detonation of Wynn's delayed-action torpedoes at the lock gates at 4:00 AM. The Germans were angered, and as they had rounded up the last of the commandos the day before, suspected local sabotage. When a second torpedo exploded an hour later, the reaction was severe as German officers felt a civilian rising was in the offering. In various incidences, some 16 Frenchmen were killed and 26 wounded.

As for the surviving British boats, *Rodier's* was disabled and abandoned about three miles downstream. The survivors of it (including *Beattie* but not *Rodier*) were picked up by a German patrol boat. Wynn's gallant little craft was destroyed by shore guns when he stopped to rescue survivors and some 30 men took to a raft thrown overboard. Only three (including Wynn) were still left alive in the cold waters when German patrols found them at 2:00 PM. Henderson's ML 306 ran afoul of one of the German torpedo boats. He fought an uneven battle for an hour, but was finally forced to surrender with 20 of his 26 men aboard dead or wounded.

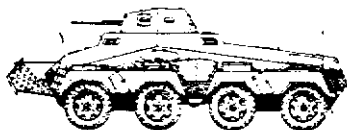
MGB 314, Irwin's ML 270, Fenton's ML 156 and Flaconar's ML 446 all kept their rendezvous with the British destroyers and started for home. But the pace was too slow for the wounded, and with German aircraft about, the survivors were transferred and the small boats were scuttled. Two other destroyers, the *Cleveland* and the *Brockelsbury*, were ordered out from England, and they made contact about mid-morning. Three other MLs missed the rendezvous and made for home on their own. Horlock's ML 443, Wallis' ML 307, and Boyd's ML 160 were also entertained by the Luft-

waffe but survived intact and even accounted for a He111 that ventured too close.

The St. Nazaire raid proved to be an important watershed in the course of World War 2. It was the first large-scale landing by Allied troops against Hitler's Europe, and it helped tip the strategic scales in the Battle of the Atlantic. Hitler had already withdrawn significant elements of the fleet back to German waters the previous month, largely due to growing pressure from the RAF. Destruction of the Normandie dock insured they would not return, and that the *Tirpitz* would not be risked.

It also had a profound psychological effect on all concerned. Besides rattling the German command tremendously, it had a positive effect on French morale as well. The British counted the raid a success, despite the appalling losses, and managed to reap a considerable store of experience and information on seaborne landings. The Americans were dramatically shown that their new allies intended not to wait passively for their salvation. The British handed out an astonishing number of decorations—another gauge of the importance they placed on the mission. Five Victoria Crosses (more than for any other single action except the defense of Roake's Drift) and 68 other awards were shared among the new "600".

But the French mayor of St. Nazaire perhaps summed it up the best when he addressed returning survivors after the war for a reunion. "You were the first to give us hope."



## THE SIMULATION

*RAID ON ST. NAZAIRE* is a bloody game—especially if played with the historical scenario depicting the abortive air raid diversion. The alerted Germans will often chew the MLs to pieces. The commandos from the *Campbeltown* are usually the player's best hope for Victory Points, since they are the best placed to actually land. You must use them to gather as many points as possible on their side of the port, as quickly as possible. On land, speed and the dispatch of the first Germans to appear is critical. If your assault groups are not aggressive enough, the demolition teams will be unable to penetrate the port in any depth and the enemy will rapidly increase in numbers. The first hour is the time for the British to execute their missions; after that, the Germans will hold the initiative as you fight to withdraw.

The Old Mole is the best place from which to reembark with the shortest route out of the harbor. Land withdrawal is far more difficult, since the commandos will have to wade through the entering reinforcements in order to get free of the town. And you can't blow the bridge at 343 until the last minute, as it will be needed for a landward break. Some few groups might even be evacuated from the relative safety of Avant Port, although the Forced Landing rules make this difficult. In short, there is no easy path back to England.

We would hope that this game has given its players some appreciation of the realities of commando operations. At the very least, we would hope that it is challenging and fun to play. If we have accomplished that much, we've succeeded. Good luck.

