

OPERATION CHARIOT



The Greatest Raid of All

Seventy years ago, in late March 1942, British military forces conducted Operation Chariot; an audacious amphibious raid on the English Channel port of St. Nazaire in German occupied France. The primary objective of the raid was to disable one of world's largest dry docks and deny its use to the German Navy.

The operation, often referred to as the St. Nazaire Raid met its objective. The dry dock was rendered unusable by the Germans for the remainder of the war. But the British Navy and Commando units involved paid a high cost in the number of personnel killed, wounded or captured. A British destroyer was deliberately destroyed in the operation and a number of smaller escort craft were sunk or badly damaged.

In spite of these losses, the raid provided a boost to British military morale. In due time, information about the raid's success was revealed to a war-weary public that was under constant aerial attack and threat of invasion by German forces. When details of the action were revealed, the British people proudly began to call it 'The Greatest Raid of All'.

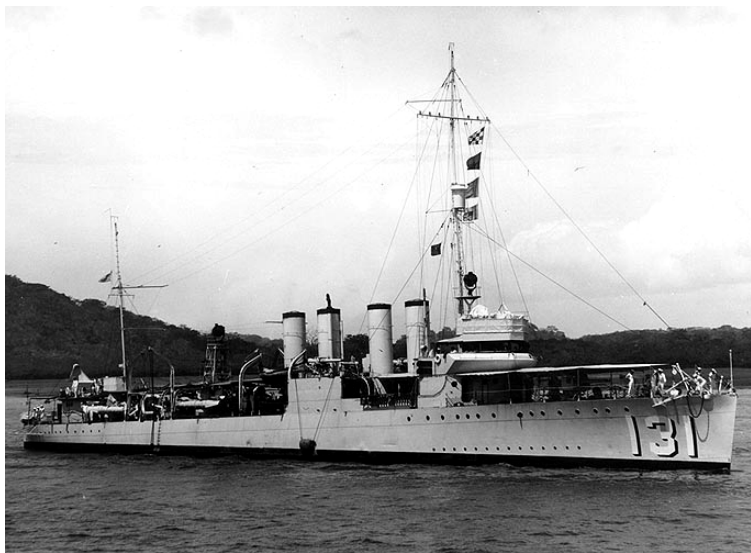
Central to the success of Operation Chariot was the destroyer HMS CAMPBELTOWN. She had been built as an American destroyer, the USS BUCHANAN (DD-131). Completed in 1919, the BUCHANAN was too late to participate in World War I.



Her namesake was Franklin Buchanan, who had served in the US Navy before the Civil War and in the Confederate Navy during that conflict. His style of conducting naval operations was as audacious and brave as that of the British in 1942. Buchanan's most noteworthy accomplishment came during the 1862 Battle of Hampton Roads. Using a single iron clad, he inflicted severe losses on Union Navy wooden vessels and revolutionized naval warfare.

The BUCHANAN was one of dozens of 'four pipers' mass produced during World War I by the United States Navy. Commissioned on January 20, 1919, she served briefly in the Caribbean before joining the US Pacific fleet that summer. Between 1922 and 1930, she was placed out of commission and held in reserve in San Diego.

After performing routine patrol duties along the West Coast in the 1930's, DD-131 was transferred to the Atlantic Fleet in September 1939. She then participated in the Neutrality Patrol until mid-1940. In September of that year she was turned over to the Royal Navy. BUCHANAN was one of fifty American destroyers exchanged to permit the US Navy to use British bases in the Caribbean.



Upon her arrival in Devonport, England, she was renamed CAMPBELTOWN, reconditioned and assigned to escort duties with the Royal Navy's Western Approaches Command. Between January 1941 and March 1942 she protected Atlantic convoys. Attacked several times by enemy submarines and aircraft, she avoided any damage.

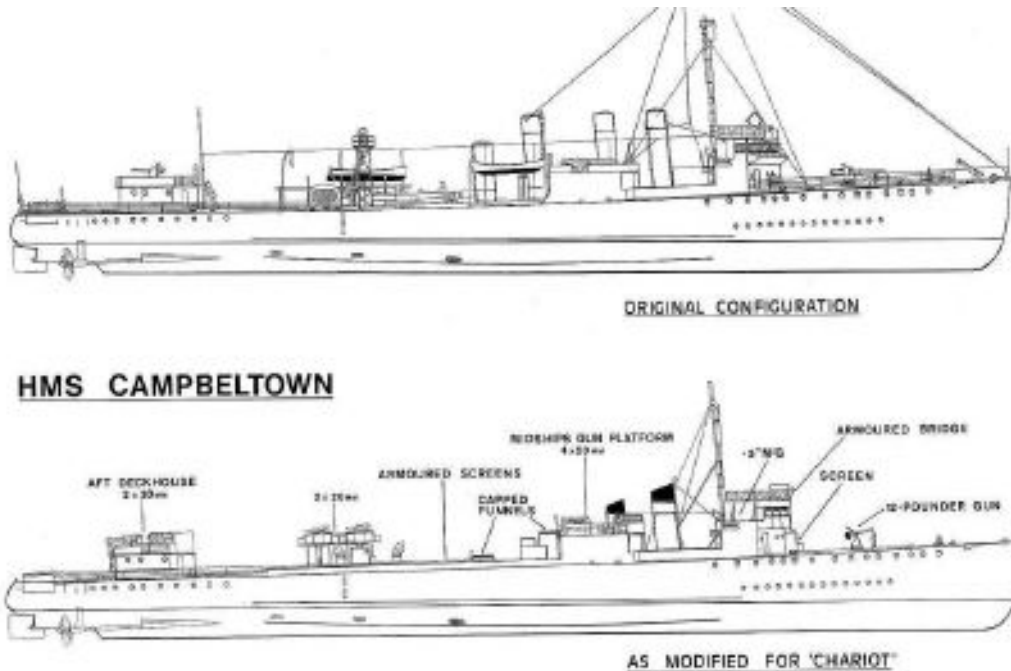
By mid-March, 1942, British military planners had developed plans for a commando raid; code-named Operation Chariot. Like many similar covert operations, this innocent-sounding code name was actually reflective of the centerpiece of the planned attack. HMS CAMPBELTOWN, considered obsolete and expendable, was chosen to be the 'chariot'. Quietly, she was detached from escort duty and sent back to the Devonport Naval Base for a 'facelift'.

Another reason for her choice was due to a slight resemblance with a German class of small destroyers. Operation Chariot's planners hoped that by making CAMPBELTOWN look more like her enemy counterpart, she could move close to the mission's main target under the added cover of darkness before being identified as British.

Shipwrights at Devonport stripped her of as much weight as possible, to permit her to transit shallow waters near St. Nazaire. All of her torpedo tubes and depth charges were removed, along with most of her large caliber weaponry. Lightweight 20mm guns were installed in several positions. Two of her funnels were removed, and the two remaining were modified by adding caps similar to those used on German vessels.



Lightly armored screens were added along the sides of her main deck, as shown above. In part to hide but also to protect commando landing parties who would ride her into battle. A steel tank was secreted in her foredeck structure, filled with four tons of explosives and tied to eight-hour delay fuzes. If everything went according to plan, CAMPBELTOWN would ram the dry dock's gate. Following penetration, she would be scuttled. It was hoped her crew could get away before a time-delayed explosion demolished the dry dock.



In parallel with modifying the destroyer, a small fleet of motor launches and motor torpedo boats was assembled. Together with the CAMPBELTOWN, they would hopefully deliver a force of some 256 British commandos ashore, and retrieve them after additional demolition actions were completed. The commandos were tasked with destroying the dock's pumps and other supporting facilities, and also attack and damage nearby bridges and U-boat pens. It was an audacious plan, to be sure



Just getting to St. Nazaire was a tall order. That French town is located six miles upstream from the mouth of the Loire River. Most of that stretch of river is shallow, except for a narrow dredged channel that runs close to shore; well within the range of multiple German defensive positions that once were positioned on the banks of the river.

The dry dock, rebuilt after the war, is 1,148 feet long with a breadth of 164 feet. Two 35-foot thick gates, measuring 167 feet wide by 54 feet deep were once fitted at each end. There were serious doubts that the venerable destroyer could breach one of those gates. But it was hoped that the planned explosion, plus the commandos' other efforts would suffice to disable the dock. March 27, 1942, was selected as the date for the attack, when there would be a full moon and a flood tide between midnight and 0200 hours.



The operation's task force left Falmouth, England carrying 612 brave British soldiers and sailors; all volunteers. The group was under the command of veteran Commander R.E.D. (inevitably called Red) Ryder, RN. He was a veteran seadog who had served in submarines, Q-ships and had survived two wartime ship sinkings. The commandos' leader was Lt. Colonel A.C. Newman, who had led two successful commando raids in Norway.



Vice Admiral Louis Mountbatten, chief of Britain's Combined Operations had told Newman: *"I'm confident you can get in and do the job, but we cannot hold out much hope of you getting out again. Even if you are all lost, the results of the operation will have been worth it. Therefore, if any of your men wish to stand down, they may do so."*

Colonel Newman conveyed this message to his commandos and the navy personnel selected to participate in the mission. Not a man backed away.

On the night of March 27th, two British destroyers escorted the attacking force across the English Channel, arriving uncontested off the mouth of the Loire River at 2200 hours. CAMPBELTOWN led her flotilla slowly towards St. Nazaire, moving at only ten knots to prevent alerting the enemy. Twice the destroyer scraped bottom, but kept going.

At 2300 hours, the fuzes were set on the ship's concealed explosives; set to go off between 0500 and 0900 hours on the morning of March 28th. In parallel with their bold approach, the RAF conducted a diversionary raid on the German submarine pens.

Nearing the dry dock at 0115 hours, the British vessels were spotted. Using captured German signals, they managed to bluff their way to less than a mile of their target. At 0122 searchlights illuminated the British flotilla and a few minutes later, the Germans opened fire with heavy caliber weapons and machine guns. Their response came too late.



The CAMPBELTOWN's sailors returned the fire as the ship's commanding officer; Lt. Commander R.H. Beattie increased speed and quietly called out steering commands. The old destroyer was hit several times, killing and wounded a number of her crew and the commandos on the open decks. Beattie stood seemingly unperturbed on the bridge as his helmsman and a watch stander on the bridge were killed. Another sailor took the helm and guided the CAMPBELTOWN the last 700 yards of her service life. The bearded Beattie's icy calm prompted someone standing nearby to exclaim: *"My God The absolute Elizabethan!"* And, then Beattie ordered *"Stand ready to ram"*.

At 0134 hours on March 28, 1942, at a speed of nineteen knots and still accelerating, the CAMPBELTOWN squarely rammed and penetrated the dry dock gate for several feet before riding upwards and coming to rest. With typical dry British humor, Beattie smiled and said: *"Well, there we are, four minutes late."*

The original plan had been to hit the target at 0130 hours. With the foot of her bow smashed, she ended up at an angle of about twenty degrees, her stern nearly submerged. HMS CAMPBELTOWN (ex USS BUCHANAN) had all but completed her last mission. The only thing remaining was for the demolition charges to go off some hours later. No one knew if the impact had damaged the fuzes, and there was no time or way to find out.

Those who could do so disembarked as quickly as possible under the heavy fire that continued to cut into their numbers. The entire gun crew on the vessel's bow was killed or wounded, but other gunners continued to fight on until German soldiers boarded the vessel and subdued them. By dawn, the Germans controlled this remarkable scene.



Some of the commandos that had ridden CAMPBELTOWN into action made their way into the dry dock's underground pumping station, placing demolition charges that destroyed it. Others, whose ranks had been thinned during the smaller support craft approach, fanned out to attack other designated targets; see map on page 4.

When the British commandos had done all the damage they could inflict, Colonel Newman ordered his men to retreat to the boats. The crews of the smaller British vessels had bravely waited for them, suffering additional casualties in the process. The overall commander of Operation Chariot, Commander Ryder, had chosen to direct the operation from a motor gunboat, instead of the destroyer destined to destroy herself.

Badly damaged, his boat soon became filled with dead and wounded. For a horrible half-hour, Ryder's craft and the few other surviving boats took additional casualties as a small number of the returning commandos managed to get onboard. When it became apparent that further efforts to save any more of Newman's men was only going to result in further deaths, Commander Ryder reluctantly gave the order to withdraw.

They had to fight their way back to the mouth of the river, where the operation's escorting destroyers were able to assist them in returning to England. German sea and air forces constantly attacked the ships and boats the entire way, and it was only due to the timely intervention by additional British warships and the RAF that they got away at all.

Colonel Newman and about seventy of his men, more than half of them wounded had to be left behind. He ordered the men to break up into small groups and try to make it to the Spanish border. He wryly noted: "*It's a lovely moonlight night for it*". Only five made it to Spain. The rest were either taken prisoner or killed in the attempt to escape capture.

As the sky lightened, the smoke began to dissipate. The killing was over. German officers and curious soldiers ventured onboard the CAMPBELTOWN or milled around her bow.



The captured British sailors were led away; no doubt to their relief, knowing that the explosive charge hidden in the destroyer's bow might go off at any time. Corpses from both sides were collected and moved into town with typical Teutonic efficiency.

Late that morning, a huge explosion killed or wounded an estimated 360 Germans, and destroyed much of the massive dry dock gate and the entire bow section of the CAMPBELTOWN. The onrush of river water carried the shattered remains of the destroyer into the flooding dock.

Ironically, Commander Beattie was being questioned at the time of the blast, and a German officer had just said that the British clearly did not realize how strong the dock gate was, and told the destroyer's skipper that only minor damage had been inflicted. After the shock of the explosion subsided, Beattie opined that perhaps they did not underestimate the target's vulnerability, after all.

Operation Chariot was an overall success. The dry dock was rendered unusable to the Germans for the rest of the war; denying them a repair base for their battleships on the English Channel. But the British soldiers and sailors who were involved paid a heavy price. Out of a total of 612 individuals involved, 169 were killed, an additional 215 were captured; most of them wounded. Of the 228 raiders that made their way back to England on March 28th, the majority were also wounded.

Those that were captured spent the rest of the war in German POW camps. Not all of them survived, but Commander Beattie and Colonel Newman were amongst the survivors and returned to duty following repatriation in 1945.

The value of Allied shipping saved in terms of men, material and supplies can only be estimated. The accomplishments of HMS CAMPBELTOWN (ex-USS BUCHANAN), and her crew and the accompanying commando force were acclaimed significant by Britain's wartime Prime Minister, Winston Churchill. Although apparently not noted as such at the time, this was in the finest tradition of America's Admiral Buchanan; well known for his head-long rush into harm's way.

The extraordinary courage exhibited by the raiding force resulted in a total of 74 British decorations, including five Victoria Crosses; Britain's highest military decoration. Many of the medals had to be presented posthumously, including two of the Victoria Crosses. The men of Operation Chariot received the largest number of decorations ever awarded for a single operation.

Ryder, Newman and Beattie received the three remaining Victoria Crosses, which they accepted on behalf of 'the unnamed officers and men, many of whom did not survive'. Following the war the French government presented additional medals to the raiding force's leaders.



Memorials were later erected in both Falmouth and St. Nazaire to honor the men of Operation Chariot. The French monument's inscription included this all-encompassing and appropriate summation of the operation: "*They achieved much, having dared all.*"

When the St. Nazaire memorial was dedicated, surviving British participants in the attack paraded from the dry dock to the monument site, crossing what they called 'The Bridge of Memories'. Leading them, once again, were Colonel Newman and Commander Ryder.



Recognizing the American-built vessel's contribution to the success of the operation, her British ship's bell was presented to the American town of Campbelltown, Pennsylvania, spelled with two 'L's', a few years after the war. In return, when the Royal Navy commissioned another CAMPBELTOWN in 1989, the town graciously lent the bell to her. When that vessel was decommissioned in 2011, custody of the bell reverted to the American town.



On March 28, 2012, on the seventieth anniversary of the raid, a ceremony of remembrance was held in St. Nazaire. By then, almost all of the British participants had passed away. But one of Newman's stalwart commandos was present. Corran Purdon was a young lieutenant who was wounded, then captured at St. Nazaire in 1942. He later escaped from a POW camp in Germany and ran free for ten days. Recaptured, he was sent to the infamous Colditz Castle prison to sit out the rest of the war under heavy guard.

Following the war, he remained in the British army, eventually rising to the rank of major general. At age 91, he stood on the rebuilt gate of that massive dry dock. One can only wonder what thoughts and memories this elderly warrior had, on that solemn occasion.

