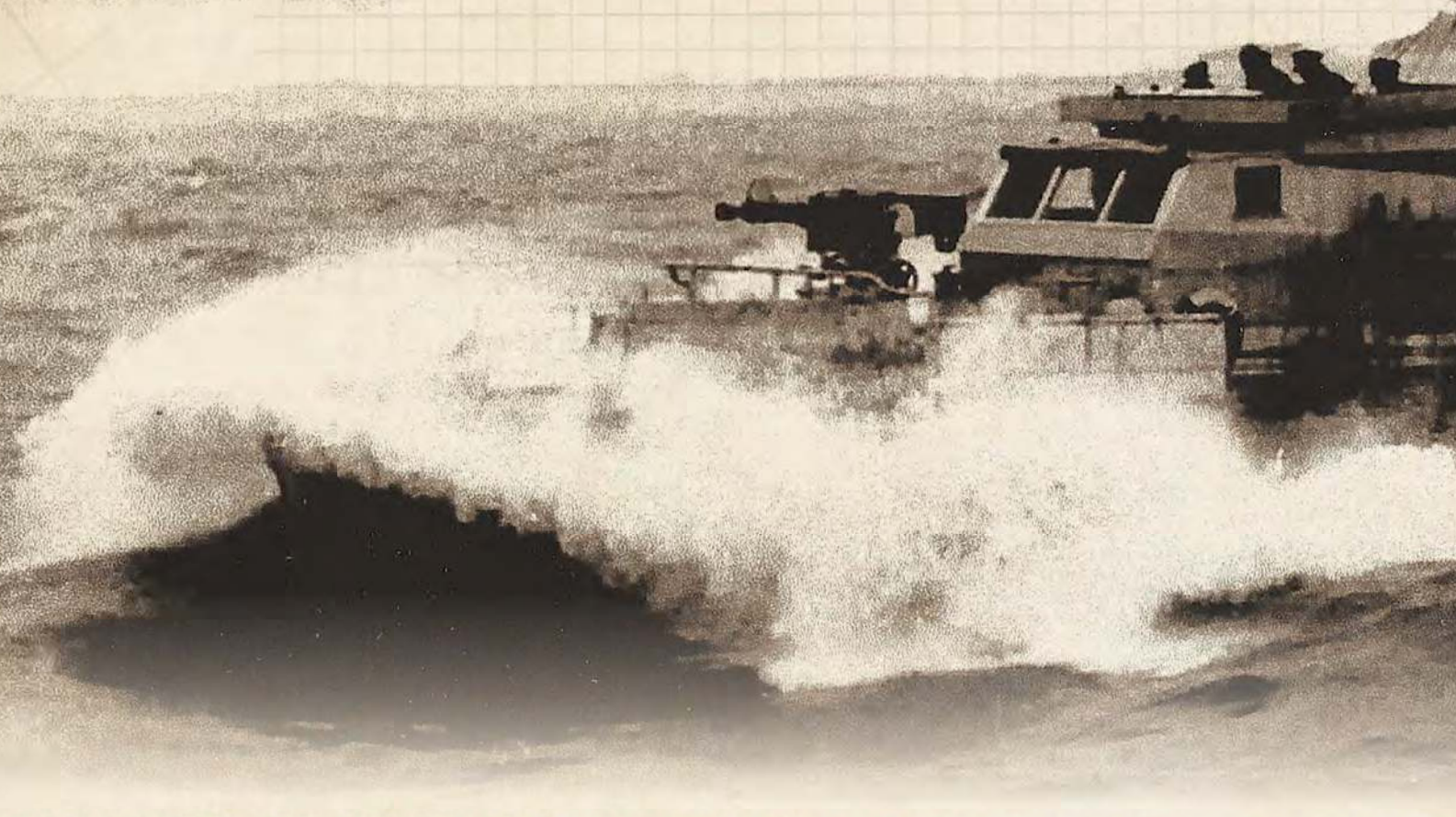


# 'Dagger' Bradford and the Cutlass

Brave and resourceful, Donald Gould Bradford was a swashbuckling naval hero who rose to become one of Coastal Forces' greatest fighting commanders. *Steve Snelling* charts the courageous career of the man who waged war beneath the 'dagger' ensign.

**OVERLEAF** Peter Scott, Coastal Forces' stalwart, reckoned that the more powerful 'Dog Boats' were a perfect match for Don Bradford's temperament, 'for it seemed that fighting was in his blood'. (ALL IMAGES VIA AUTHOR)

**BELOW** A C-class Motor Gun boat, similar to MGB 333, which Bradford described as a 'wicked adversary' for her 'natural enemy', the E-boat.



# Bradford

## new



The churned waters glowed a phosphorescent green in the wake of the small force of motor torpedo and gun boats, forcing them to slow to a crawl to escape detection in the danger-filled waters off the Dutch coast. A sliver of moon was visible through the high cloud and the flickering lights of buoys could be seen marking the shallows close to the Hook.

It was an hour before midnight on 19 September 1943 and Lt Don Bradford's 'seek out and sink' sortie was about to bear unimagined fruit. His boat's radar had picked up the presence of a large vessel that appeared to be lying stopped about three-quarters of a mile off the port of IJmuiden.

From the bridge of MTB 617, he turned his 'glasses' towards the harbour, where he could just about make out a dark shape. But he was not convinced. "It looked too big for a ship and I just could not believe it," he later wrote.

He called for another radar check, which confirmed the first report. There was definitely something there. Something big. And something important enough to warrant →



**RIGHT**

Don Bradford and his No.1, Sub-Lt Frank 'Tubby' Hewitt, alongside MGB 333's dagger emblem painted on the wheelhouse.



inner and outer screens of escorts. "This was real luck," Bradford later observed, "the kind of target we all used to dream about in our most optimistic moments."

The larger escorts, identified as M-class minesweepers, lay to the north and appeared oblivious to the impending threat posed by the four MTBs and two MGBs. Two more converted trawlers lay about a mile to seaward and Bradford counted at least four motor torpedo vessels, either E-boats or R-boats, apparently acting as close escorts. With excitement and tension mounting in almost equal measure, he decided it was time to edge closer to his prey.

The scene was set for a night to remember and an extraordinary exploit

full of dash and daring to rival any in the history of the Royal Navy's Coastal Forces.

*Life of adventure*

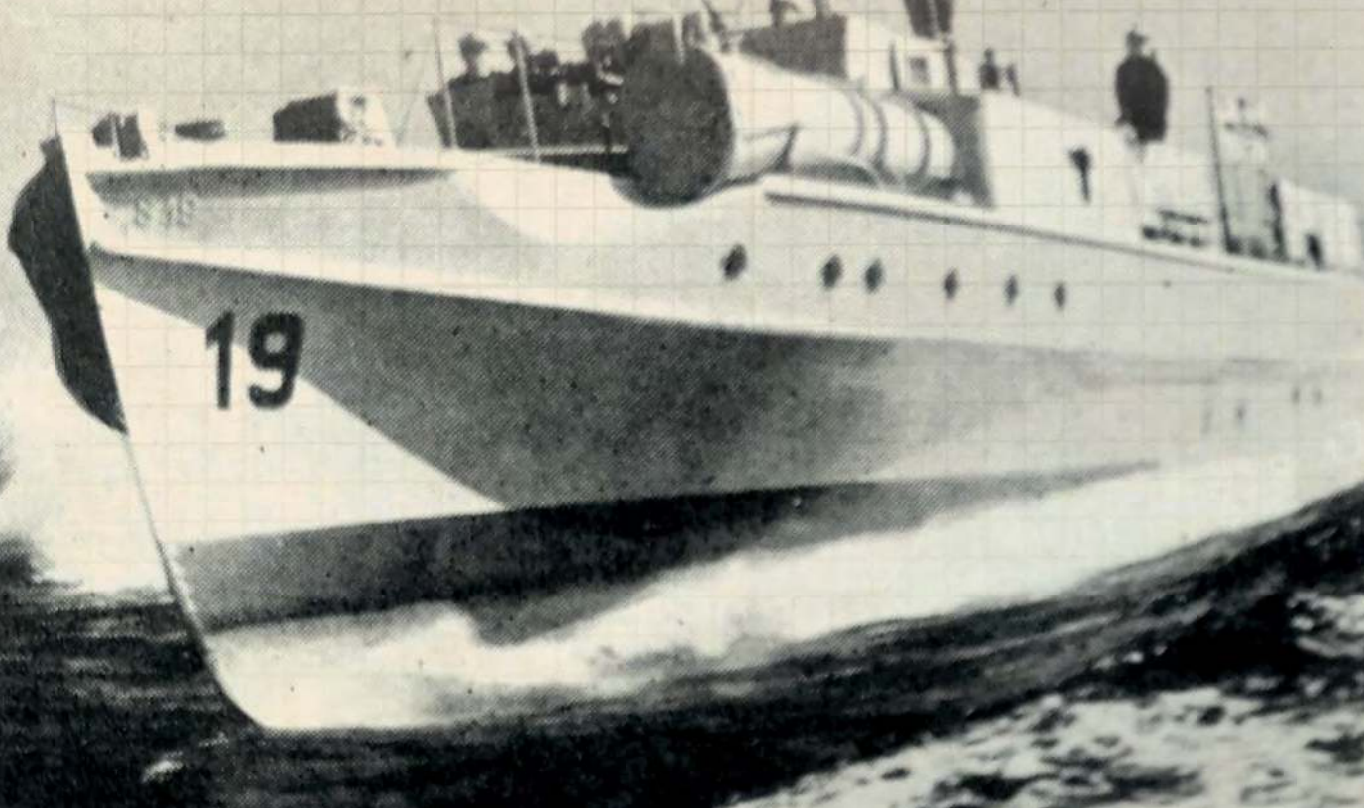
One of Britain's foremost small boat commanders, Donald Gould Bradford had spent the previous decade chasing danger and adventure in a life that was anything but conventional. An accomplished musician, he was a headstrong, highly intelligent boy, who had abandoned his studies at the Saint-Cyr French military academy and run away to sea aged

16. Jumping ship in Argentina, he had worked on a cattle ranch, married, lost his first wife in a motor accident, explored the Amazon and fought with the Bolivian army – all before his mid-20s.

A vehement anti-fascist, he followed up the Gran Chaco War by rallying to the Republican cause in the Spanish Civil War, being wounded for a second time while serving as a cavalry ensign. But the former Merchant Navy seaman turned Marks & Spencer manager, who had spent much of the 1930s fighting other people's wars, was initially rejected by his own country. His daughter, Robyn Baird, explained: "They wouldn't let him in the Army or the Air Force because they

**BELOW**

The sharp lines of an 'E-boat', more accurately known as Schnellboot and the German equivalent of the Motor Torpedo Boat.





interned after his ship was bombed by German aircraft. Ever resourceful, within two weeks, he had escaped to Gibraltar. Returning to England, he was posted to Coastal Forces, serving his 'apprenticeship' aboard a motor launch before being handed his first command in November 1942. To a man of his swashbuckling qualities, MGB 333, based at HMS *Midge* as Great Yarmouth was styled, was much more to his liking.

*Cutlass crew*

In characteristically unorthodox fashion, he quickly made his mark: establishing his own *esprit de corps* with a red-hilted cutlass daubed on the wheelhouse and a flag bearing a dagger on a blood-red background flying from his mast. The piratical theme was carried on below deck in a cabin decorated with dirks, stilettos and a curiously curved African bush knife. The weird armoury was completed by a naval cutlass above the skipper's bunk, and a further rack of them lining the gangway just in case the opportunity ever arose to lead a boarding party, Nelson-style, onto the deck of an enemy man o' war.

'Dagger' Bradford, as he was soon dubbed, became captain of the 'Cutlass Crew', though not everyone shared his enthusiasm for such bloodcurdling, close-quarter action.

Dudley Ridgeon, who joined MGB 333 in early 1943, recalled his astonishment at finding "six cutlasses in a rack in the wheelhouse and grappling hooks and chains lashed to the guardrails".

As quartermaster it was his job to keep the cutlasses polished, but he admitted: "I never saw myself as being in the class of Forester's Hornblower or Patrick O'Brian's Jack Aubrey, leaping over guardrails waving a cutlass!" →



**LEFT**  
The original complement of MGB 333, with Don Bradford second left, at their Great Yarmouth base, HMS *Midge*.  
(COURTESY JOHN BROAD)

**BELOW**  
Another view of a *Schnellboot*.

reckoned he was 'red', in other words a communist, because he'd fought with the Republicans in Spain.

"It was pure madness. In terms of political persuasion, he was... a die-hard Conservative. That's why he joined the Navy. Nobody else would have him." But his third war did not start well.

In July 1941, six months after joining HMS *Malvernian* as a 28-year-old Royal Naval Reserve sub-lieutenant, he was back in Spain, having been

*"... establishing his own esprit de corps with a red-hilted cutlass daubed on the wheelhouse and a flag bearing a dagger on a blood-red background flying from his mast"*



**LEFT**  
The crew of MGB 333 display their unofficial dagger battle flag after their headline-grabbing action against E-boats in March 1943.

**RIGHT**

Two crewmates alongside MGB 333's emblem, complete with 'kill' markings to indicate successes against E-boats.

(COURTESY DUDLEY RIDGEON)



**RIGHT MIDDLE**

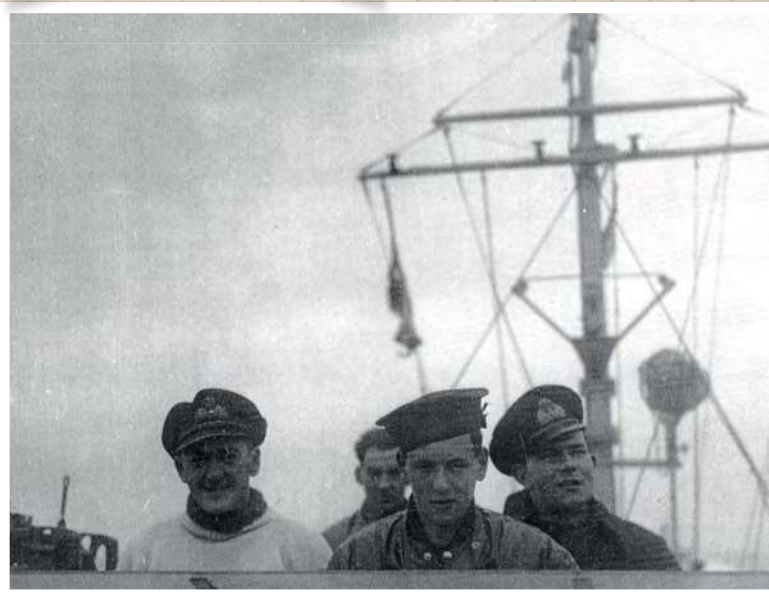
A line of Motor Gun Boats of a sort that frequently operated alongside Don Bradford's 31<sup>st</sup> MTB Flotilla pass an armed trawler.



**RIGHT**

Don Bradford, left, Dudley Ridgeon, centre front, and Frank Hewitt, right, on the bridge of MGB 333.

(COURTESY DUDLEY RIDGEON)



**BELOW**

A 'Dog boat' displays her fighting strength on a deck that proved a splendid platform for its array of guns.

A journalist who accompanied Bradford on one sortie into the North Sea, during which he kept a knife down the leg of his right sea boot, described him as a leader "born out of his time ... who loves to fight". Ridgeon concurred. Bradford was "in a class of his own", he reckoned. "There's no doubt he would have liked to have leapt onto an E-boat with cutlasses in hand and captured it, but he wouldn't have had me behind him!"

Another shipmate, Rowland Lovick, was similarly struck by his skipper's eccentric brand of leadership. His abiding memory was of a man who was "always looking for trouble". It was an impression not without foundation, as the astonishing events of 28/29 March 1943 fully testified.



## Ramming stations

MGB 333 was one of two boats patrolling a shallow patch of water at the northern end of 'E-Boat Alley', the East Coast convoy route that had become a favourite hunting ground for the enemy's 'Schnellboot' flotillas. Based on intelligence reports of an impending attack on the southbound convoy FS1074, they were ordered to lie in wait a few miles east of the shipping channel, ready to intercept any raiding force. Their vigil was not in vain.

After three hours of rocking and rolling, Bradford heard "the whisper of engines on our starboard bow, growing louder". Bringing his crews to action stations, he set course to cut across their anticipated course and very quickly three wakes were sighted.

It was pitch black with a sea mist reducing visibility to little more than a hundred yards, but as they rapidly closed there was no mistaking the black crosses on the bridges of the approaching E-boats. "They were going slow," Bradford later wrote. "They were like ghost ships, I couldn't see any men on deck - just the boats gliding through the water in a seemingly effortless way." The calm did not last long.

Altering course to narrow the gap to fewer than 50 yards, he made for the second boat in line and ordered "open fire". What he called "a hell of a blast" signalled the start of a frantic little action, fought at such close range it was impossible for the gunners to miss. Caught in a vortex of fire, the E-boat that was Bradford's quarry "shuddered



and jerked" as his gunners "smothered it with a hail of high explosive from pom-poms and the Oerlikons". The return fire was "slight and feeble" by comparison, though enough of a nuisance to ignite a fire in the magazine of one of 333's Oerlikons.

As the increasingly uneven fight intensified, Bradford spotted "chunks flying off the E-boat's hull and deck fittings as our heavy stuff ripped into its side". The raking fire had cleared the enemy's bridge and deck when Bradford saw a sudden belch of flame erupt from the battered vessel.

"Her decks lifted in the air and folded back as if hinged," he wrote. "I think the Oerlikon must have hit and exploded the warhead of a spare torpedo. It certainly finished her. She disintegrated and disappeared before my amazed eyes and I ducked hurriedly as a deluge of bits of wood and metal

fell from the air and rattled down on our decks."

Not satisfied with one success, he turned his attention to the leading boat, which was pouring heavy fire at him from a little more than 50 yards. Cutting across its wake, he drew up alongside, all guns blazing until his forward pom-pom fell silent with a jammed round. In a split-second reaction that would become part of Coastal Forces legend, Bradford rang the signal for 'ramming stations', grabbed the wheel, spun hard over and steered straight for the E-boat.

"We hit about 20 feet from the stern," he wrote. "The sharp bronze shoe on the bows of my boat bit into the soft wood as she lifted and rode partly over the low after deck of the E-boat. I could feel her crunching a way through, deep into the vitals - and then the E-boat broke. →

### ABOVE

The revolutionary new D-Class MTBs - 'Dog Boats' - tied up in the Thames, played a key role in Coastal Forces' victory in home waters.



a glorious day," he later recalled, "a flat calm sea, a cloudless blue sky and brilliant sunshine."

As he set course for Brown Ridge, a navigational point roughly halfway across the North Sea, he was struck by the incongruity of the scene. "It was difficult to realise that the logical and anticipated conclusion to the pleasant sea passage was death or maiming of as large a number of the enemy as possible," he wrote. What Bradford termed a "steady plod" towards the enemy's coastal convoy route, some five miles off the Dutch coast, was uneventful and broken only by an hour-long pause midway to ensure they did not arrive before dark.

Once in position, they waited until 617's radar gave them their first indication that something incredible was in the offing. The anticipation of an unusually big ship sitting, apparently stationary, a few thousand yards away was, however, tempered by the knowledge that she was protected

**ABOVE** The stern came off and slipped down my starboard side and the remainder scraped and bumped down the port side. We had bitten our way straight through..."

**RIGHT** Remarkably, 333 escaped with only slight damage to return to base with Bradford and his crew "on top of the world". The action with E-boat S29 resulted in a Distinguished Service Cross, a flurry of headlines and a transfer to the so-called 'Dog Boats' of Great Yarmouth's 31<sup>st</sup> MTB Flotilla.

From L to R: Lts 'Bob' Harrop, Jeff Claydon, Peter Wilkinson, Don Dowling and John Whitby. Bradford received a Bar to his DSC and among seven further awards were a DSC for Harrop and a Mention in Despatches for Dowling.

words, "to let loose a unit of MTBs for a foray on the chance of meeting something". Borrowing a couple of MGBs commanded by Lt Don Dowling, Bradford duly led out his six-boat combined force in the early afternoon of 19 September. "It was

### Promotion

Captaincy of MTB 617, one of the revolutionary 31-knot, heavily armed D-class boats, which married a destroyer bow to a fast motor boat stern, was swiftly followed by promotion to acting lieutenant commander as senior officer in command of the eight-boat flotilla. Bradford's audacity, combined with his natural pugnacity, proved ideal for his new role.

Just as he had revelled in the freedom to range across the North Sea on missions known as 'bangers' - naval parlance for operations in which commanders were allowed to have 'a bang' at anything they encountered - so he delighted in the opportunity to organise raids on German convoys along the Dutch coast. It was during one such sortie, barely three weeks into his new role, that Bradford's marauding policy achieved its most memorable coup.

A frustrating fortnight of inaction followed. During which the 'Cutlass Crew' had been waiting in vain for word of a large enemy supply ship reportedly preparing to make a dash down the Channel, Commander-in-Chief Nore decided, in Bradford's



**RIGHT** Part of a flotilla of German Räumbootes - R-boats - motor launches converted into heavily armed gunboats to escort coastal convoys.

by a double shield of escorts within easy reach of one of the most heavily defended ports in enemy-occupied Europe. Unfazed, Bradford decided to investigate.

### *Clear run in*

Edging ever nearer, he imagined a stealthy approach culminating in "a quick dash in as soon as the escorts were aroused". But it did not work out that way. With the target, by now clearly a "colossal" passenger liner, "looming up like a block of flats" Bradford watched, with a mixture of relief and disbelief, as the close escort torpedo boats move off westwards, "leaving us a completely clear run in".

Radioing Dowling to form a screen between his MTBs and the enemy trawlers, he then manoeuvred his small force closer. So "thrilled and fascinated" was he by the sight of such a "terrific mountain of a ship" that, almost before he knew it, he had reached to within

300 yards of it - "perfect torpedo killing range". It was almost too good to be true. And so it proved.

### *Sitting target*

Just as he was on the point of firing, his navigator called out that they were over a sandbank. It meant that the depth of water was too shallow to safely launch a torpedo. In fact, had he done so he would, as he later admitted, have stood "a better chance of blowing up my own ship than the enemy's". Realising that guns alone were no use against such a big target, Bradford turned his force about and crept away. As he later admitted, he was feeling "sick at heart" and "suffering the agonies of apprehension in case we would be detected and I had lost the chance of an attack". Luck, however, was on his side.

With the enemy as ignorant of their withdrawal as they were of their approach, they turned and headed in

again on a slightly different course until the liner was "dead in the sights - a perfect sitting target", just 1,000 yards ahead. It was the moment of truth. "I pulled the firing levers and away went two 'fish'," wrote Bradford. "I was [so] certain of hitting that I ordered the other boats not to fire and without waiting for the explosions we turned towards the trawlers and I reformed the whole unit in readiness for a gun battle. "As the boats got into line ahead formation we heard two loud explosions and felt the heavy underwater thud of torpedoes striking home. I turned my head in time to see the torpedoed target completely obscured by water, spray and smoke and bits of wreckage flying in the air. We had done it. One torpedo had hit the engine room and the other just forward of the bridge."

In the confusion that followed, one of the trawlers, perhaps mistaking the attackers for

#### BELOW

A line of German armed trawlers used to protect the convoys that were targets for Bradford's 'Dog Boats'.

*"In the confusion that followed, one of the trawlers, perhaps mistaking the attackers for friendly craft, signalled Bradford's flotilla, which reacted as one by opening fire with every available gun. Within a minute, she was reduced to a burning wreck, with fires raging from stem to stern"*





**RIGHT**  
A German E-boat  
under fire.  
(1940 MEDIA LTD)

friendly craft, signalled Bradford's flotilla, which reacted as one by opening fire with every available gun. Within a minute, she was reduced to a burning wreck, with fires raging from stem to stern.

Closing to within 200 yards, she appeared to Bradford "like a stricken dragon", but even as she was sinking she managed to inflict damage on two of his boats.

In the fracas that followed, two more enemy ships, hastening out of IJmuiden to assist the embattled escorts, were sent packing before the larger escorts and enemy shore batteries joined the fray. Laying smoke to cover their retreat, Bradford broke off the fight and, after a brief brush

with some enemy flakships, sprinted for home with damage but without loss to discover that his victim was the 17,000-ton German requisitioned liner *Strasbourg*, a giant merchantman masquerading as a hospital ship, which was left a part-submerged wreck.

*Rip-roaring*

What one of the MTB skippers called "very pretty work" was followed a few weeks later by near-disaster as a clandestine mission to land a small party of commandos turned into a desperate battle for survival. Having aborted the original operation after being intercepted on the way out, Bradford transferred from the



**RIGHT**  
55<sup>th</sup> Flotilla's  
distinctive sharks'  
mouth bows were  
a symbol of the  
fierce pride inspired  
by Don Bradford.

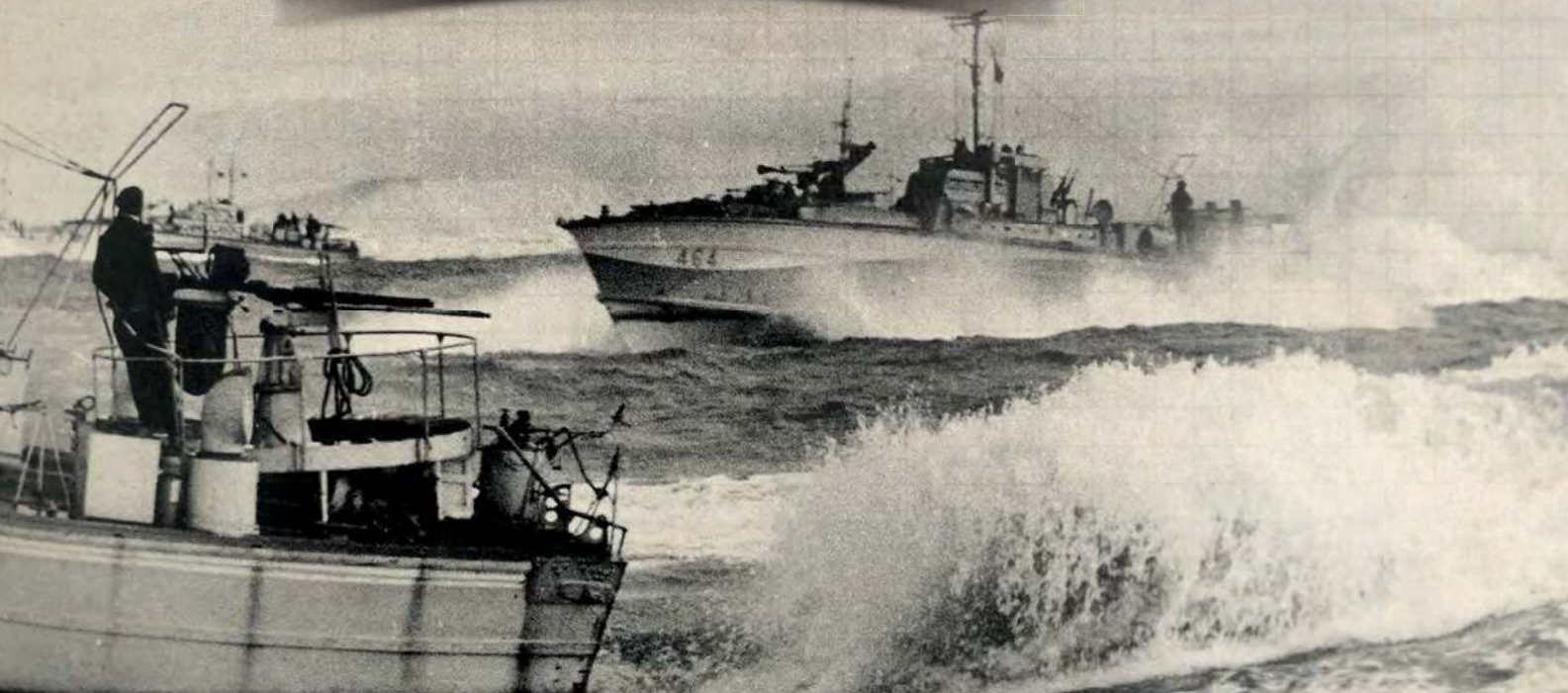


**BELOW**  
Boats of the  
29<sup>th</sup> Canadian  
MTB Flotilla which  
operated alongside  
Bradford's Flotilla  
to protect the  
invasion armada  
and subsequent  
supply effort.

damaged 617 to MTB 606, which was then hard-hit during an ill-starred clash with a superior enemy patrol force. Wounded by shrapnel in the left arm and chest by a direct hit on the bridge, Bradford found himself surrounded by 10-12 escorts, with a sinking trawler, a blazing merchantman and two more damaged trawlers "for bedfellows", while the battle raged around him.

"Having visions of sausage and sauerkraut for breakfast", Bradford decided to "charge through the ring of escorts". Incredibly, despite the boat being in a terrible state with all guns knocked out, both petrol compartments on fire and the wheezing engines barely able to make five knots, they succeeded. It had been a costly affair.

As well as the loss of MTB 606, which had to be abandoned in a sinking state during the withdrawal,





most of the other boats involved in the action suffered damage with ten men killed and 21 wounded in return for two trawlers sunk, a merchant ship set on fire and five escorts damaged. The following April, Bradford's enlarged command, restyled 55<sup>th</sup> MTB Flotilla, left Great Yarmouth for Gosport as part of the build-up to Operation Neptune, the naval element of the Normandy invasion.

### *Supporting the D-Day Landings*

Buoyed by their achievements in the North Sea, the rip-roaring spirit among the 12 well-trying crews was sky high as they headed for the Channel. Their craft bore distinctive shark's mouth markings on their bows as symbols of a fierce unit pride and even more fearsome reputation for forceful action. To Bradford, the ostentatious livery represented not just "an excellent recognition mark", but a conviction that they owed "superiority to none"; something they were to prove time and again during the arduous battles before and after the invasion.

Those actions may have lacked the set-piece dramas of a ramming or the sinking of a ship as large as the *Strasbourg*, but they were of far greater strategic importance in guarding the Overlord armada and vital supply

chain during its most vulnerable phase. This was an achievement recognised by the crowning award of a Distinguished Service Order to Bradford to add to his DSC and two Bars. Firstly, in protecting the eastern flank of the invasion in Seine Bay, and then in establishing a characteristically aggressive close blockade of Le Havre, the 55<sup>th</sup> under Bradford's inspirational leadership had, according to Peter Scott, veteran small boat commander and historian, succeeded in "carrying the fight right on to the enemy's doorstep in the old Coastal Forces tradition".

After two years of almost unrelenting combat and with final victory in sight, Don Bradford bowed out of command, "a little depressed and regretful that the old days of high endeavour and unselfish team work with the old gang

had come to a decided end". But the sense of pride at what they together achieved never left him.

In a private memoir he began writing on a desk that formerly belonged to the commander of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Schnellboot Flotilla, he summed up what it had all meant to him: "The 55<sup>th</sup> MTBs made up a good Flotilla," he observed. "They were my Flotilla. The officers and men were the best in Coastal Forces ... We shared a common feeling of pride in our boats and we produced the answer to the Admiralty's need for MTBs to harry the enemy on his own coastline and keep him away from ours. They backed me up and followed me - in anything I attempted..."

*Donald Bradford DSO DSC\*\* passed away in June 1995.*

**ABOVE**  
A 'Dog Boat' of the 29<sup>th</sup> Canadian MTB Flotilla.



**LEFT**  
A Canadian 'Dog Boat' shows off its power and speed.