

Chapter Thirteen

Boulogne Harbour

11/12 April 1942

Britain's armed forces today can boast some of the best Special Forces in the world. Like its sister elite unit the Special Air Service, the Special Boat Service, simply known as the SBS, can trace its origins back to the Second World War when Captain Roger Courtney first demonstrated the potential of using canoes to carry out special operations on the lochs of Scotland during commando training in 1940. Courtney's belief that folding kayaks could be used for raids was initially rebuffed by his senior commanders but, not satisfied with their reaction, he simply decided to prove his point. He did so by paddling up to a commando landing ship, HMS *Glengyle*, at the time anchored in the Clyde, and then climbed aboard undetected to write his initials on the captain's door before stealing a deck gun cover from the ship. He then took the cover to a nearby hotel and presented it to a group of senior naval officers.

Courtney's audacity led to him being given permission to form his own specialist unit, initially called the Folbot Troop (named after the type of canoe) but later to become 1 Special Boat Section and ultimately the SBS. Courtney had also won many admirers from elsewhere. His early vision of using canoes would later lead to the legendary raid by Royal Marines on the French port of Bordeaux, a raid that was to become immortalized as the Cockleshell Heroes, but eight months before that there was a similar, but seemingly unheard of raid, carried out by two men of a specialist troop of 6 Commando.

The specialist troop, called 101 Troop, was formed to carry out reconnaissance missions and attacks on enemy shipping. Leading the troop was 25-year-old Captain Gerald Montanaro. Born in Kent, but from a Maltese background, Montanaro had studied engineering before the war and had naturally been commissioned into the Royal Engineers. Following the outbreak of war he had served as an engineer with the British Expeditionary Force in France before volunteering for the commandos. Although Montanaro clearly believed in the concept of using canoes to carry out special operations, not everyone was convinced by the idea.

By the end of 1941 the troop had carried out only a few beach reconnaissance missions, but it now needed a bigger challenge if it was to survive. Montanaro knew that shipping anchored in harbour was always vulnerable to attack and so he pushed forward a simple but daring plan to lead a raid against two large tankers, each believed to be carrying thousands of tons of copper, known to be anchored in the outer harbour at Boulogne. His plan was for two canoe teams, each of two men, to cross the Channel in a Royal Navy motor launch under the cover of darkness and, having been dropped off just a few miles from the shore, to then paddle into the harbour and plant limpet mines on the tankers before making their escape.

The plan, called Operation JV, was given the go-ahead by the Admiralty and planned for the night of 11/12 April 1942. However, permission to carry out the raid was only given on the understanding that only one canoe took part. To send two canoes was considered too risky and so only one tanker could be attacked. Naturally, Montanaro was to go on the raid and he chose Trooper Fred Preece to accompany him.

The launch allocated to take the canoe and its two men across the Channel was ML 102 commanded by Sub-Lieutenant Trevor Mathias. Although it was still only April, the weather was good and the sea conditions fine for the crossing, and soon after midnight the motor launch was on the other side of the Channel and positioned off the port of Boulogne.

Having lowered their canoe into the water, Montanaro and Preece paddled towards the harbour. The moonlight meant they could clearly see vessels in and around the harbour, but the strength of the tide and a stiffening breeze was making paddling incredibly hard work. Furthermore, to enter the harbour meant passing close to two historic fortifications, and a lighthouse on the breakwater meant there was a possibility they would be illuminated against the water.

The two men pressed on towards the harbour and then eased their way as quietly as they could past the fortifications. They could now see the threatening shape of an enemy E-boat moored alongside, but still they pressed on. They could even hear people coming out of a building close by as they paddled and then glided slowly into the harbour, keeping as low as they could in their canoe. Then, their hearts missed several beats as they heard the sound of E-boats approaching and then passing them on their way out of the inner harbour and into the Channel at the start of a patrol. Although Montanaro and Preece had felt the full force of the wake caused by the E-boats as they passed through the outer harbour, the canoe had remained unseen in the darkness of the shadows of the harbour wall.

With the E-boats out of the way, Montanaro surveyed the scene as he looked for their target. He could make out the silhouette of the tanker but the team hit more problems as the front of the canoe became grounded on rocks. The two men tried to free the canoe by

rocking it backwards and forwards as quietly as they could in the shallow water, but all they managed to achieve was to puncture the hull to the point that the canoe started taking on water. Undeterred, they temporarily plugged the hole as best they could, set the timers on their charges and headed back out into the harbour towards the tanker to make their attack.

They quickly and quietly made their way to the tanker, eventually positioning themselves up against the stern. While Preece held the canoe as steady as possible, Montanaro set the charges. The limpet mines had to be positioned a couple of feet or so below the waterline, but the shape of the hull, and the barnacles covering its surface, meant it was a difficult task. Montanaro scraped away as best he could before fixing the mines. The two men then slowly worked their way along the hull and then back up the other side until all eight charges were set.

Time was now getting short. It had been two hours since they had left the launch and they had already been inside the harbour for nearly an hour. They were cold and getting very tired, and so it was time to make their escape, otherwise they would miss their rendezvous with the launch.

Again keeping as low to the canoe as they could, they paddled slowly and quietly away. The breeze had increased and so had the swell. It took the two men nearly an hour to make their way back out of the harbour and into the Channel. But now the canoe was taking on more and more water. While one man paddled, the other mopped up the water using whatever clothing he could find. It was desperately hard work and the two men felt as though they were about to freeze.

It took another half an hour before they were far enough from the harbour and close to where they expected to meet the launch. They could hear the sound of an engine in the distance: for a while it could have been any motor launch or E-boat approaching but, as the vessel approached, they soon recognized it as the familiar sound they had long been waiting for. It was ML 102. Montanaro and Preece had to be helped aboard. They were exhausted, soaked and numb from the extreme cold, and by now their canoe was a wreck.

Later that morning, as sailors and workers at the port of Boulogne went about their business, the outer harbour was suddenly rocked as the charges exploded. They had gone off later than planned but the devastating result was obvious the following day when aerial reconnaissance photographs of the harbour revealed extensive damage to the tanker.

The raid had been a success for several reasons and silenced the critics of such tactics. In June, Montanaro was awarded the DSO for leading the raid, while Fred Preece received the DCM. The troop was later absorbed into Courtney's newly formed 2 SBS. The concept of using canoes to carry out special operations was no longer just