

FRIENDLY — FIRE OFF NORMANDY

WORDS TOM GARNER

WWII naval veteran Claude Sealey reveals a deadly encounter with his own countrymen in a notorious but little known incident off northern France

FROM THE ARCHIVES

Below: In this image the shell splashes from the aircraft's four 20mm cannon assist the pilot in correcting his aim before unleashing a salvo of RPs



Image Source: photograph C 4641 from the collections of the Imperial War Museums.



Claude Sealey was wounded during the RAF attack on the 1st Minesweeping Flotilla on 27 August 1944

Below: A salvo of 60lb rocket projectiles fired from a Typhoon towards a German railway siding, 30 March 1945. Sealey would have been under attack aboard HMS Jason from the same aircraft and weapons



Image Source: photograph CL 2362 from the collections of the Imperial War Museums

It is a beautiful summer's day in August 1944 and six ships of the Royal Navy are sweeping the area near Le Havre for mines. Despite the dangerous task the warm weather is a welcome relief for the recent veterans of the notoriously cold Arctic Convoys. Some are so relaxed that they sunbathe on deck, but a formation of aircraft appears out of the sun and suddenly dives towards the flotilla.

This would be an alarming situation if it were the enemy, but the sailors are more alarmed to see that these are Hawker Typhoons of the Royal Air Force and without warning the fighter-bombers attack their own ships. Explosions erupt everywhere and vessels begin to sink. Many men have to abandon ship but to make matters worse German shore batteries open fire and kill vulnerable sailors in the water. By the time the Typhoons leave two ships have been sunk and hundreds of men are either dead or wounded.

One of the casualties is a young British stoker aboard HMS Jason called Claude Sealey. Although he became covered in shrapnel wounds Sealey survived to recall his horrific experiences at the hands of his allies.

Powering a minesweeper

Born in 1923 the teenage Sealey was keen to serve in the Royal Navy, "I joined in September 1940 when I was 17 years old. I got a shore job because I was underage and I ran away from home to join up. My sister was at the barracks

gate crying and I was given the choice to either go home or stay but I decided to stay. Of course I wish I hadn't that day when I saw her crying."

When Sealey turned 18 he was transferred to general naval service and introduced to the ship that he would serve on until 1945. "I went in for a stokers course up at Skegness and as soon as I came back down to Portsmouth I was drafted onto the minesweeper HMS Jason at Christmas 1942. The ship was at Leith docks near Edinburgh and I was a lone draft – I was on my own. I got the train from Portsmouth right up to Scotland and picked the ship up. HMS Jason was my only ship for the entire war."

As a stoker, Sealey worked in the bowels of the ship to keep it constantly on the move. He recalls that discipline was strict: "In the boiler room you had a petty officer and me as a stoker. There were six burners and if they signalled from the bridge or engine room that they wanted more speed then you'd put more burners on to create steam. When the sirens alarmed that we were being attacked I was always ordered to check the smoke glass. I had to go up a ladder and right across the back of the boiler to see if it was all clear because we weren't allowed to make smoke. The petty officer would wait at the bottom of the ladder so I couldn't get out – he wasn't a nice man."

Sealey's duties were split between the boiler and engine rooms. "There were two boiler rooms mid-ship and the engine room was in the stern where the turbines were stored that powered the propellers. There was a head and

a stern turbine with a walkway towards port and starboard. At the end was a vat that was used for making fresh, clean water that was mainly for the boilers."

In the engine room Sealey was responsible for an important part of the ship's capabilities. "I liked being in the engine room because an artificer and myself would take the throttles. This meant we were in charge of the ship's speed. The bridge used to signal down how many revs they wanted and we'd open up the steam for the appropriate speed."

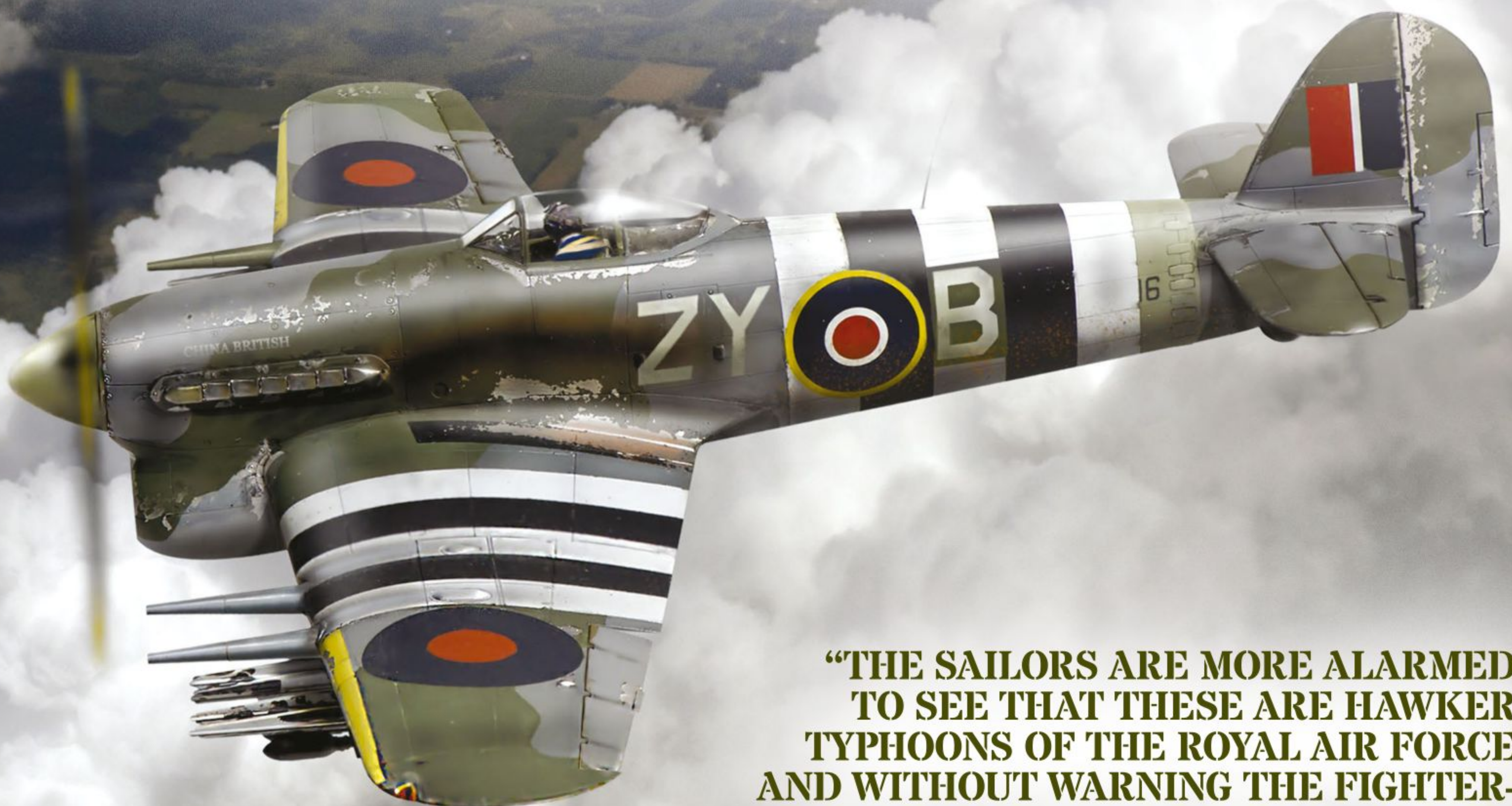
Conditions were hazardous in the lower parts of the ship and if it were attacked Sealey would have been in great danger, but he had little time to feel worried. "I felt vulnerable in the boiler room and not so much in the engine room but most of the time I didn't think about it much because we were all busy. We just had to adapt and get on with it."

Clearing the way on D-Day

Sealey's first active service was on an Arctic Convoy to Russia in August 1943 where he sailed to Polyarny, Murmansk and Archangel as part of the Allied attempt to supply the Soviet Union with arms and equipment. He experienced vicious storms, German U-boat and air attacks as well as witnessing Russian brutality against their own people.

By the time Sealey returned to warmer waters the journey had made him an experienced, if weary, seaman. "On the way down from Scapa Flow there was a U-boat off the Irish coast

Poor communication caused the RAF bombers to attack Allied ships on that tragic day in August 1944



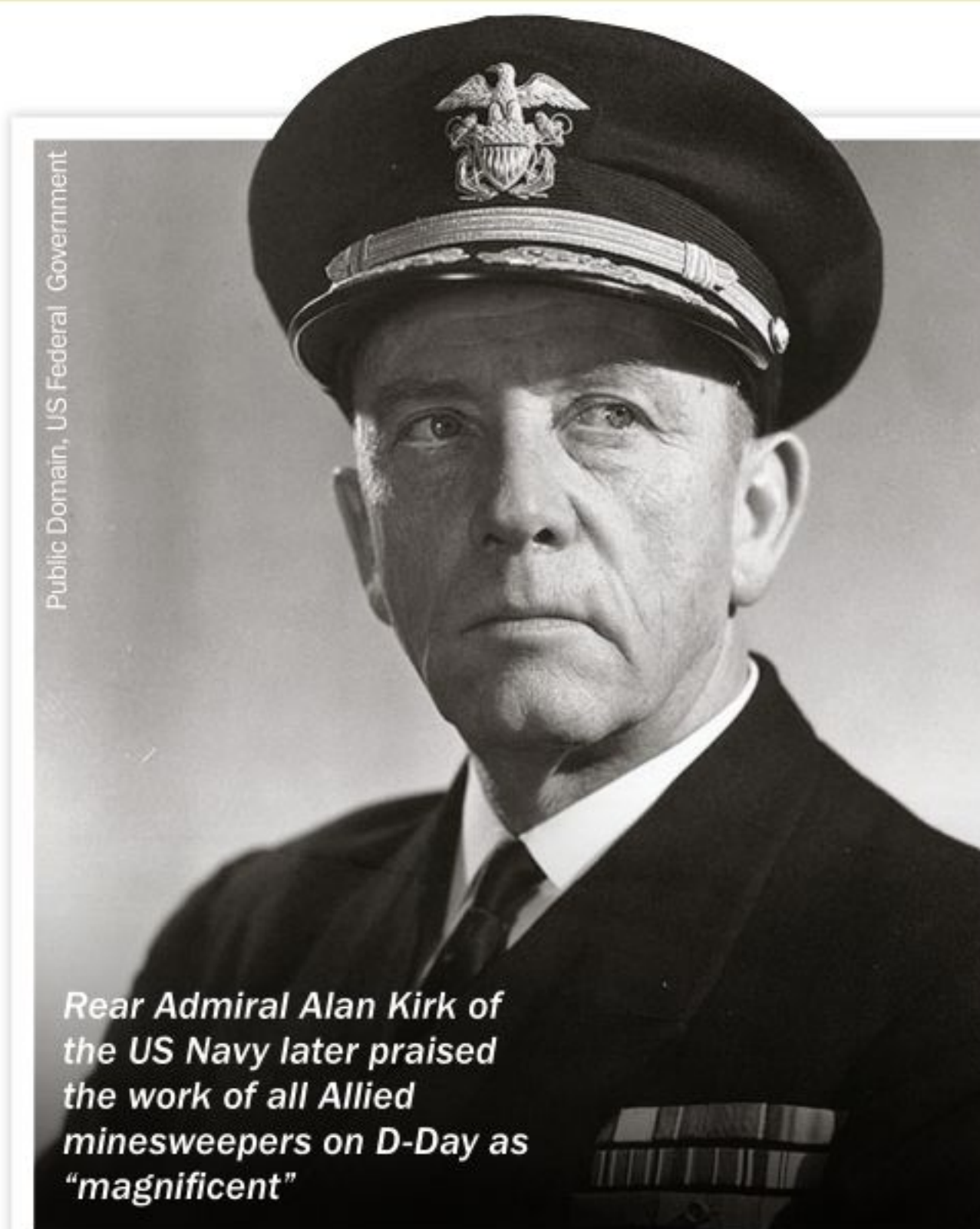
"THE SAILORS ARE MORE ALARMED TO SEE THAT THESE ARE HAWKER TYPHOONS OF THE ROYAL AIR FORCE AND WITHOUT WARNING THE FIGHTER-BOMBERS ATTACK THEIR OWN SHIPS"

because they used to hang about over there. We got the alarm and I remember there was an acting petty officer who went down on his knees and prayed, 'Please, we've got back this far, don't get us now!' Everybody was terrified. Luckily it didn't come to anything and we got back to Portsmouth. After that we did a workout for D-Day."

Sealey was now a leading stoker on HMS Jason and as a minesweeper the ship would be one of the first vessels to sail on 6 June but Sealey almost missed his chance to take part in the event that changed the war: "Just before D-Day you couldn't see the Isle of Wight for ships and we were anchored over there. The skipper gave us leave to be back the next day. There were three of us and we missed the liberty boat to take us back. I was terrified and I rang Portsmouth barracks, reported to the officer on the watch immediately and he gave me a letter so we didn't miss the next day because that was the start of D-Day."

On 6 June 1944, HMS Jason sailed from England as part of 1st Minesweeping Flotilla (1st MSF). The minesweepers' responsibility was to lead the assault forces onto the Normandy beaches and clear the German minefield that protected the area. Officially codenamed Operation Neptune, the work of the minesweepers was an essential part of the beach landing process. German minefields were laid in depth within 16 kilometres (ten miles) of the French coastline and the flotilla had to sweep ten 'channels' to the beach assault areas for the troops to get through.

HMS Jason was one of 350 different vessels to participate in the mine-clearing operation and her orders were to clear 'Channel 9' of the approach route to Sword Beach for Allied troops to land. Consequently, the minesweeping flotillas led the way for the assault forces as



Rear Admiral Alan Kirk of the US Navy later praised the work of all Allied minesweepers on D-Day as "magnificent"

Sealey recalls: "We took off on 6 June, more or less as dawn was breaking and we swept the mines. There were a lot of them and we had trawlers that went around shooting them up and exploding them."

France eventually came into view and HMS Jason got so close that Sealey could see individual landmarks. "As we got nearer to the French coast I could see this clock tower at Arromanches. I couldn't see the time on it but I could see the tower. We went in as close as we dared and then turned to sweep mines again. Then all the big ships came in and started hammering the coast."

Sealey was aware that he was in the vanguard of the Allied invasion but at the time he found it difficult to absorb the significance of the moment. "We were right in the forefront of the invasion but we were so busy doing things that you didn't think about what was happening.

The funny thing is when you're in with a lot of men together you've got that comradeship and you don't think about yourself."

The planning of Operation Neptune had been meticulous and because of the courageous work of the minesweepers relatively few warships, transport or landing craft were seriously damaged or lost to the mines. All 350 vessels survived by the end of 6 June, making Neptune the most well-executed minesweeping operation ever undertaken. The American naval commander of the Western Task Force Rear Admiral Alan Kirk praised all the Allied minesweepers: "It can be said without fear of contradiction that minesweeping was the keystone in the arch of this operation. All of the waters were suitable for mining, and plans of unprecedented complexity were required. The performance of the minesweepers can only be described as magnificent."

Nevertheless, HMS Jason's work was not over. Sword Beach was on the eastern flank of the Allied assault zone and therefore particularly vulnerable to attack from the Le Havre area. However, Sealey could not have foreseen that the most deadly problem would emerge from his own side.

Securing the invasion channels

After D-Day Sealey continued performing minesweeping duties and almost had an unfortunate incident with part of the invasion force. "We kept sweeping mines in the English Channel for a long time and then we had a mishap with one of the landing craft, which was coming across with some tanks and we went smack straight into her side!"

Shortly afterwards HMS Jason was deployed to the area off Le Havre in late August 1944, 11 weeks after D-Day. By now, Allied armies had advanced well inland but the Germans

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The Hawker Typhoon was a fearsome British fighter-bomber that became known for ferocious ground attacks and its capabilities as a low-altitude interceptor



Below: A rocket fired from a Typhoon of No 181 Squadron, Royal Air Force, on its way towards buildings at Carpiquet airfield



Image Source: photograph C 4460 from the collections of the Imperial War Museums

“AMONG OTHER ACTIONS, HALCYONS RESCUED 14,000 SOLDIERS FROM DUNKIRK AND TOOK PART IN 78 CROSSINGS DURING THE ARCTIC CONVOYS”

An underwater mine explodes during WWII. The role of minesweepers such as HMS Jason were essential in reducing the destructive threat of German mines on Allied shipping

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HALCYON-CLASS MINESWEEPERS

Claude Sealey's ship HMS Jason was part of an important but underappreciated group of naval vessels that cleared mines from the hostile waters of WWII

Between 1934-39 the Royal Navy commissioned 21 oil-fired minesweepers that became designated as Halcyon-class ships. The navy had first deployed improvised minesweepers during the Crimean War but the technology developed rapidly during WWI when Flower-class minesweeping sloops were introduced.

By the 1930s the Halcyon-class minesweeper was being developed. These vessels had a weight displacement that was 175 tonnes less than their Grimsby-class sloop counterparts as well as being six metres (20 feet) shorter. Because of the nature of their work, the minesweepers needed to be both small in size

and have as shallow a draught as possible. Consequently, to save weight the ships were only provided with the most basic armament including small numbers naval or anti-aircraft guns, machine guns and depth charges.

To compensate for the relative lack of weapons the minesweepers relied on cover from other warships or aircraft for protection. So long as there was adequate cover Halcyon-class ships still had to continue sweeping for as long as possible even when under attack.

The minesweepers had various deployments during WWII including the Atlantic and Arctic Oceans, the North and Mediterranean seas and

home waters. Among other actions, Halcyons rescued 14,000 soldiers from Dunkirk and took part in 78 crossings during the Arctic Convoys. By May 1945 nine ships had been lost and 578 crew members were killed. At the end of the war Winston Churchill recognised the minesweepers service with an official statement: “The work you do is hard and dangerous. You rarely get and never seek publicity; your only concern is to do your job, and you have done it nobly. No work has been more vital than yours; no work has been better done. The ports have been kept open and Britain breathed. The nation is once again proud of you.”

HMS Halcyon was the first in her class of minesweepers. Commissioned in 1934, the ship saw action at Dunkirk, the Arctic Convoys and D-Day
Image Source: photograph FL 9841

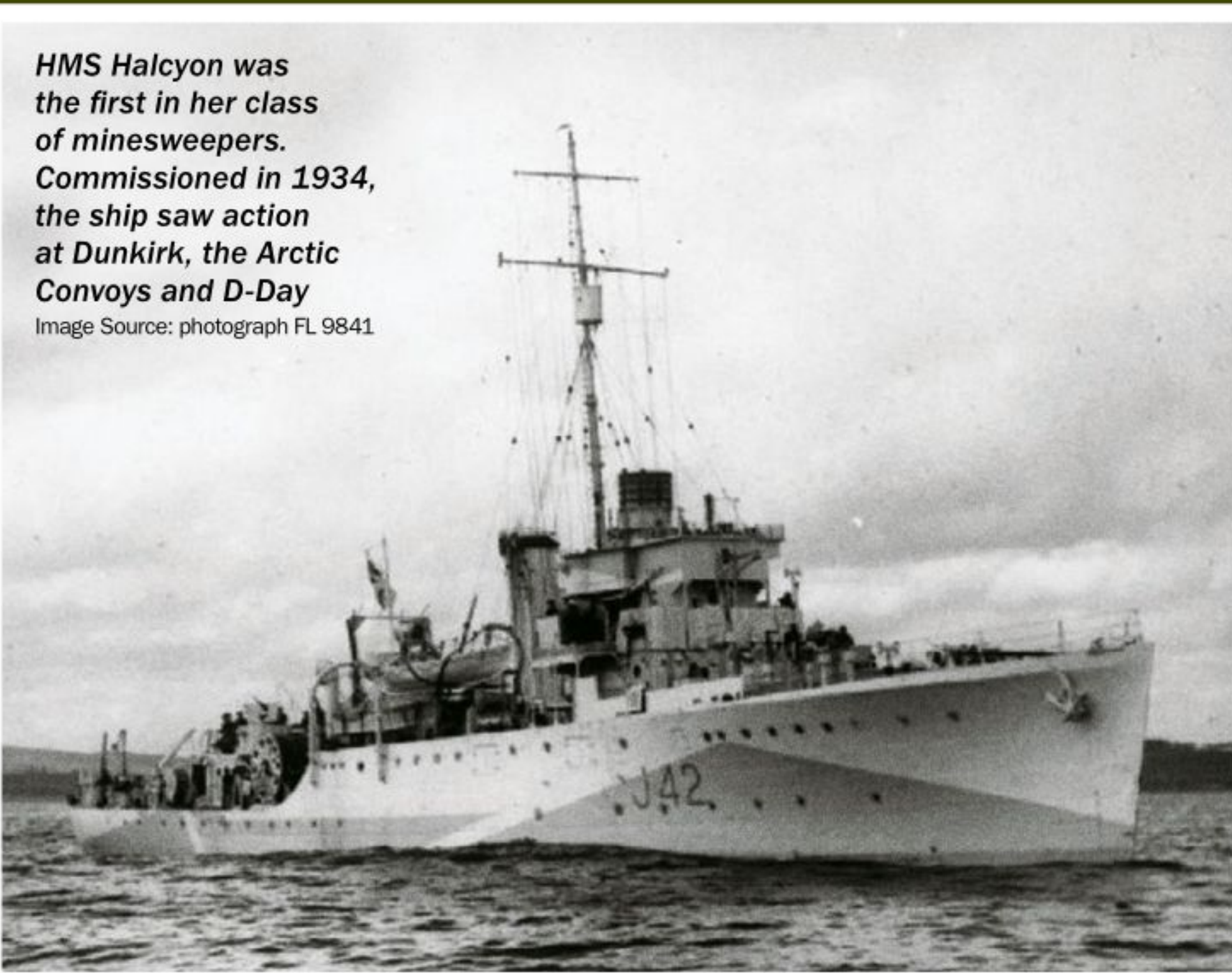


Image Source: photograph FL 9841

HMS Jason in 1941. Sealey served on this Halcyon-class minesweeper from 1942-45
Image Source: photograph FL 14225 from the collections of the Imperial War Museums



Image Source: photograph FL 14225 from the collections of the Imperial War Museums

still held the important port of Le Havre, which had heavy shore batteries that continually threatened shipping. The Germans also had E-boats, midget submarines and explosive motorboats at their disposal that could inflict night attacks at Arromanches where Sealey had been sweeping weeks earlier. Despite the elapsed time HMS Jason still operated out of Arromanches and anchored in the 'Trout Line', which was a defensive perimeter of warships formed around merchant shipping.

1st MSF consisted of Halcyon-class minesweepers that included HMS Harrier, Britomart, Hussar, Salamander, Gleaner and Jason. Their main task was to clear mines from the area between Portsmouth and Arromanches at night but on 22 August 1944 their orders were changed. The flotilla was now required to clear a German field of magnetic mines off Le Havre, which would enable Royal Navy warships to bombard the port and assist the advancing Canadian Army.

Between 22-25 August the flotilla swept the minefield that was about eight kilometres (five miles) off the French coast between Fécamp and Cap d'Antifer before HMS Gleaner and HMS Harrier left for repairs. With a reduced number of ships the flotilla was expected to stay in dock at Arromanches but after 24 hours' rest the remaining vessels were ordered to return to minesweeping duties. One of Sealey's superiors aboard HMS Jason was the flotilla's navigating officer Lieutenant H G S Brownbill who later recalled that the redeployment order was not unusual. "We knew full well that the clearance and search of the area off Le Havre had not been completed, and we also knew

"THE SHIPS BURST INTO FLAMES WITH THE BRITOMART LISTING TO PORT WHILE THE TYPHOONS SWEEPED AROUND FOR ANOTHER ATTACK"

that clearance was also needed to permit a heavy force to the area to bombard the Le Havre coastal region. I was promised that the orders would be amended to allow the 1st MSF to complete its unfinished search and clearance. Happy that all was at hand, I returned to Jason."

After these arrangements were made signals of the amended order should have been circulated to other service commands. All services had to be given advance notice of movements at sea by Allied ships so that every activity could be accounted for. If all commands were well-informed then RAF aircraft based on landing strips in Normandy could intercept enemy vessels. Unfortunately, this normally smooth system of operations would not go to plan for the remaining ships of 1st MSF.

'Friendly' fire

On 27 August 1944 HMS Jason set off with her fellow minesweepers HMS Britomart, Salamander and Hussar along with the supporting trawlers HMS Lord Ashfield and Colsay. Sealey recalls that the weather was fine. "We got orders to go off the French coast at Le Havre because the Jerries still held that part of France on the Seine. We were out there sweeping in beautiful hot weather in August."

HMS Jason was guiding the flotilla and flanked by the Britomart and Salamander on either side. HMS Hussar was following

behind while the two trawlers were laying buoy lines in the rear. At 1.30pm Sealey recalled seeing RAF aircraft appear but in unfavourable circumstances. "These aeroplanes came over and buzzed us a couple of times and we knew they were ours. However before we knew what was happening they came back around and sunk two of our ships and blew one in half!"

The aircraft in question were 16 rocket-firing Hawker Typhoon fighter-bombers from 263 and 266 (Rhodesia) Squadrons and 12 supporting Supermarine Spitfires from a Polish squadron. HMS Jason immediately fired her anti-aircraft guns before signalling at 1.32pm and 1.34pm, "Am being attacked by friendly aircraft." At the same time the other ships were also under attack, particularly the Britomart, Salamander and Hussar. The ships burst into flames with the Britomart listing to port while the Typhoons swept around for another attack.

HMS Jason was raked by aircraft cannon fire that disabled the anti-aircraft guns and cut the steam pipe that made a loud shrieking noise. At 1.37pm the Jason signalled, "Three ships hit and in danger of sinking," while the Britomart continued to sink and HMS Hussar and Salamander burned heavily.

Sealey became one of the many casualties during the attack. "I got wounded. We were attacked by RAF Typhoons firing rockets but what hit me was ordinary cannon fire. I was part of a watch party that was aft of starboard. It

RAF personnel loading RP-3 60-pounder rockets onto the launch rails of a Hawker Typhoon. The 20mm cannons of the aircraft are also visible



Image Source: Public Domain

Bombs hit the tail plane of an American B-17 Flying Fortress by the bomber flying above it during a raid over a German city

ALLIED 'BLUE-ON-BLUE' INCIDENTS OF WWII

The destructive power of the weapons used between 1939-45 increased the chances of devastating friendly fire attacks

The friendly fire attack on 1st Minesweeping Flotilla off Le Havre was sadly not a unique case during WWII and blue-on-blue incidents occurred everywhere on land, sea and in the air.

Despite the meticulous planning, accidents were strikingly prevalent around the time of the D-Day landings. During a simulated exercise on 28 April 1944 eight LSTs (Landing Ship, Tank) were practising landing troops into Lyme Bay,

England, when nine German E-boats attacked the transports leaving more than 600 Americans dead. To make matters worse, in the confusion a British cruiser then shelled the landing troops with live ammunition that resulted in another 308 Americans being killed.

As part of the Normandy breakout in July 1944 Allied aircraft accidentally bombed American positions. The incident was due to miscommunications over poor weather conditions but the result was 136 American soldiers killed.

However, worse was to come on 3 May 1945 (five days before VE Day) when RAF Hawker Typhoons attacked German transport ships SS Cap Arcona, Deutschland and Thielbek in the Bay of Lübeck. The three ships were filled with thousands of Allied POWs and prisoners from Nazi concentration camps but the RAF did not know this and attacked with bombs, rockets and cannon fire. The Cap Arcona and Thielbek were both sunk and at least 7,000 people were killed with only around 400 survivors. The incident has since become known as the deadliest case of friendly fire during the war and possibly in history.

"THE THREE SHIPS WERE FILLED WITH THOUSANDS OF ALLIED POWS AND PRISONERS FROM NAZI CONCENTRATION CAMPS BUT THE RAF DID NOT KNOW THIS AND ATTACKED WITH BOMBS, ROCKETS AND CANNON FIRE"

Image Source: Photograph A 24675



The artificial 'Mulberry' harbour at Arromanches, June 1944. The construction of this harbour would not have been possible without the efforts of the 1st Minesweeping Flotilla on D-Day

Image Source: All images on this page from collections of the Imperial War Museums.

Out of the two ships that were sunk on 27 August 1944 HMS Hussar suffered the most losses with around 55 men killed



Image Source: Photograph FL 22918

HMS Britomart's crew had been praised for their work on Arctic Convoys but she was later sunk on 27 August 1944 with the loss of over 20 men



Image Source: Photograph FL 2980

HMS Salamander, which was one of the two ships guiding HMS Jason, was blown in half by friendly fire and later had to be scrapped



Photograph FL 18563

was just outside the wardroom where there was a ladder that went up to the boat deck. During the bombing the area where we were suddenly became full of blue sparks flashing and I was bowled over on the boat deck. I ended up lying on the deck and when I got up there was blood everywhere and that was it. I wasn't wounded badly but I was put in the wardroom with the other wounded. I had bits of shrapnel in my right foot, back and three or four pieces in my hip. I had those pieces for ages."

After a final attack at 1.40pm the aeroplanes flew away. The attack had only lasted around ten minutes but the RAF left behind burning, sinking ships and a sea that was strewn with debris and struggling survivors. Tragically, the ordeal was not over as Sealey explains: "HMS Britomart copped it and she went straight down and then HMS Hussar also went down. HMS Salamander was blown in half and my ship HMS Jason also got hit. At the same time the Jerries fired from their shore batteries and there were all these survivors in the water and their heads were being blown off. It was so terrible."

Despite her own considerable damage HMS Jason had taken the lead in rescuing survivors from the stricken Salamander and Hussar. During the evacuation from the Hussar, Jason's crew put down scrambling nets and rescued over a dozen survivors when the German shore batteries opened fire. One shell landed 90 metres (295 feet) from the Jason and forced her to retire with sailors still in the water. The ship then laid smoke screens to provide cover while it towed the Salamander back to Arromanches.

After returning to Arromanches the Jason moved on to evacuate the wounded, including Sealey, in what turned out to be a personal blessing in disguise. "HMS Jason had quite a few holes in her but our skipper steamed us into Cherbourg and there was a hospital ship ready for us for the wounded including myself. We came back over to Portsmouth but instead of being sent to the local naval hospital I was put on an army train to Basingstoke initially and

then on to Sedgfield, County Durham, where I met my wife who was a nurse."

The cover-up

The RAF attack on the 1st MSF had caused enormous damage. HMS Britomart and Hussar had been sunk while HMS Salamander was so badly damaged that she had to be scrapped. There was also heavy damage and casualties on other ships and in total 117 sailors were killed with a further 147-153 wounded. It was the largest single naval loss of Operation Overlord that was not the result of German action.

Sealey contends that his attackers knew the ships' identity but had to proceed because of pressure from the admiralty. "The planes knew who we were after flying around two or three times but whoever was ashore in France – an admiral apparently – said that shipping should not be in that area and that they had to get on and do it. In those days you'd sometimes get a ship with a British flag up and it would turn out to be German so the planes were given strict orders to sink whatever was there but they knew we were British."

The tragic incident had occurred because of poor communication. Naval officers had signalled orders for the sweep on 27 August but a routine copy had not been sent. The officer responsible was new in his post and his supervisor had not noticed the error. Additionally, the naval shore radar was disabled that day and consequently the flotilla was not spotted moving into the area.

Despite these errors the RAF had themselves expressed doubt about German ships operating off Le Havre in broad daylight. The operations record book of 263 Squadron stated, "Six ships were located at the given pinpoint sailing south-west. Four were probably destroyers and two motor vessels. Owing to doubt as to the identity the controller was asked four times whether to attack. The controller said there were no friendly ships in the area and ordered an attack."

"WE WEREN'T ANGRY WITH THE RAF BUT WE DID BLAME THE ADMIRAL"

Such miscommunication cost many lives and there was an immediate cover-up of the incident. Sealey recalls, "We didn't know if there was an enquiry, it was all hushed up."

There had actually been an enquiry at Arromanches two days after the incident, which concluded that Rear Admiral James Rivett-Carnac had ordered the RAF attack because he had not been informed of the flotilla's work in the area. Three subordinate officers were subsequently court-martialled with one – Acting Commander D N Venables – receiving a severe reprimand for not thoroughly checking the amended order on 27 August.

None of this complicated set of badly relayed orders was fully explained to victims like Sealey and his crew members, who were left in the dark over the details. "It was quite some afterwards when we knew what had actually happened. We weren't angry with the RAF but we did blame the admiral. Somebody should have picked up a phone and said, 'We've sent these minesweepers around there because there were still Germans in the area.'"

The admiralty's embarrassment was so acute that recommended bravery awards for personnel caught up in the incident were almost denied until one outraged senior admiral intervened. Nevertheless, the cover-up was strictly imposed as Sealey remembers. "Afterwards we were told, 'Do not repeat what happened here and by whom.' We were given strict orders not to mention it."

It was an ignoble end to an avoidable incident that had been created by simple errors and inexcusable negligence. Men like Sealey from the 1st Minesweeping Flotilla had been a crucial factor in making the Allied invasion of Europe possible and they were ultimately ill-rewarded for their hard work and success.