

## Ron Ashby 1910-1998

**MTB** commander who spirited away a Chinese Admiral under the noses of the Japanese after the fall of Hong Kong

RON ASHBY, who died aged 87, had an eventful career in Coastal Forces which spanned the years from 1941 to 1945 and took in scenes from Hong Kong to the English Channel, and from the Mediterranean to the Arakan coast of Burma.

Ashby was one of the few RNVR officers to reach the rank of Acting Captain. Before the Second World War, he worked for Dodwell & Co, associates of Jardines in Hong Kong, "selling Dodge trucks," as he said. It was an enjoyable life. Ashby spoke four Chinese dialects, went duck shooting in the marshes in the New Territories and racing at Happy Valley, and sailed a small gaff-rigged boat.

In 1937 he joined the Hong Kong RNVR, and at the outbreak of war was a lieutenant in the 2<sup>nd</sup> MTB Flotilla. His command, MTB 07, was one of the earliest 60ft British Power Boat Company designs for the Royal Navy, known to the local Chinese as Wind Thunder Boats.

After the Japanese attacked in December 1941, the flotilla carried out a "mini-Dunkirk", ferrying troops from the mainland to Hong Kong by night and lying up in the small inlets, covered in branches, by day.

On December 19<sup>th</sup>, MTBs 07 and 09 raided Kowloon harbour and sank several Japanese landing craft with troops on board. They came under heavy machine-gun and cannon fire, both from the shore and from aircraft. MTB 07 had two men killed, and her engines broke down, but she was towed to safety by 09.



**Ashby: Quick on the Draw in war of nerves**

When Hong Kong fell on Christmas Day, the MTBs were ordered to escape as best they could. The flotilla rescued a party of officers and men from GHQ, including Admiral Chan Chak, Chiang Kai-shek's representative in Hong Kong.

The Admiral, who lost a leg due to infection in his youth, took off his wooden leg and though shot in the arm when the launch he and his party were on was shot up trying to reach the MTB Flotilla . After swimming ashore they were eventually spotted by the MTBs and picked up. As Ashby headed 07 up the coast, his last sight of Hong Kong was that of his own large bungalow on the cliffs above Stanley Bay in flames.



The flotilla made shape for Mirs Bay where 07 along with the remaining boats of the 2<sup>nd</sup> MTB Flotilla were scuttled. The whole party got ashore and assisted by Chinese guerrillas to whom the Admiral was a national hero, trekked overland to Waichow, in Guangdong province, where the Chinese gave them a rapturous reception.

From there, Ashby and his party travelled by river, rail and lorry to Rangoon. When that city fell to the Japanese on March 8<sup>th</sup> 1942, they were among the last to leave, on board an American tramp steamer, the *Heinrich Jessen* (later the depot ship HMS Barracuda), which took them to Calcutta. On the way out to sea, they passed incoming Japanese warships, who ignored them.

Ashby was awarded the [DSC](#), and the Admiral was appointed an honorary KBE.



### **MTB 07 in Mirs Bay**

Ronald Robert Wilson Ashby was born on July 9<sup>th</sup> 1910 and went to the Kings School, Canterbury, before joining Benskins, the family firm of brewers in Watford. He soon left to work in Canton.

When he reached England after his experiences in the East he transferred to the “Imperial” RNVR and joined Coastal Forces, serving for a time as first lieutenant of a Steam Gun Boat under Peter Scott, and taking part in a hectic period of night actions off the enemy coast.

On July 9<sup>th</sup> 1942 he went to sea in SGB 4, named *Grey Fox*, of which he due to take command the next day. In a furious night encounter off Etaples, *Grey Fox* and *Grey Wolf* engaged six German

minesweepers. They sank two minesweepers, but a third collided with *Grey Fox* with such force that everyone on her bridge was thrown on their faces and a huge hole was driven in her hull. *Grey Fox* struggled home, with bows almost awash, but with only one casualty – Ashby, who was wounded on the chin by a splinter and broke a tooth on the rudder indicator when *Grey Fox* heeled over in the collision.



He was promoted to lieutenant commander, and on January 1<sup>st</sup> 1943 took command of MTB 670, as senior officer of the 33<sup>rd</sup> MTB Flotilla of Fairmile D Dog Boats, operating from Southampton and then Felixstowe.

In May, the flotilla joined a convoy of 15 MTBs, bound for the Mediterranean. In the early hours of May 4<sup>th</sup>, they were in the Atlantic north west of Cape Finisterre when one MTB was shelled and set on fire by a U-boat. In the confusion, with MTBs roaring off in all directions, two U-boats collided with each other at some speed and both sank. MTB 670 picked up three survivors from [U-659](#), and nine from [U-439](#). For this action he was awarded the [RNVR Officers Decoration](#).

In the Mediterranean, which he described as “bloody”, Ashby recalled having to drive at full speed through British sailors in the water from a ship which had just sunk, off Crete, while still under air attack.

In one air raid, he was blown off his bridge into the sea and badly wounded in the left leg, losing most of the knee.

After an operation, he certified himself fit for service; but the wound gave him pain and a pronounced limp for the rest of his life. Pieces of bomb splinter were still emerging in the 1960s.

In December 1943, Ashby went to India as Naval Officer in Charge, Chittagong, and was later appointed Senior Officer Arakan Coastal Forces, with operational command of flotillas of Motor Launches (MLs). These supported the seaward flank of the army in the campaign which began in the Burmese Arakan in December. The campaign disrupted Japanese communications along the coast and penetrated enemy-held waterways and harbours to interrupt supply routes.

For months, the MLs operated in the *chaungs* – tidal creeks and inlets which weaved through a vast mazy pattern of mangrove swamps, mud banks and tiny islands, forming a wilderness marked on army maps as “water” and on Admiralty charts as “land”.

The “Chaung war” was a war of stealth and secrecy, won by concealment, camouflage and hours of lying in wait followed by short, sharp ambush. The enemy might be encountered around any bend, and survival went to those who were literally fastest on the draw.

For his part in the “Chaung war”, Ashby was mentioned in dispatches and awarded a [bar](#) to his [DSC](#).



He stayed in the RNVR until 1948, and commanded the maintenance ship *Duncansby Head*.

He then bought a boatyard (J Hart & Son), on the Norfolk Broads near Norwich, which he renamed Hearts Cruisers. He bought an MGB from the Navy, which he named *Morning Flight* and converted into a houseboat. It was meant to be only a temporary home, but he and his family lived on board for 41 years.

Ron Ashby contributed to the development of the Broads as a holiday region. He was for many years chairman of Blakes Holidays, and served on the committee which drew up the first Broads Study and plan.

Towards the end of his life, his leg wound rendered him virtually disabled, but his application for a War Disability Pension was refused on the grounds that he was never officially invalided out of the Navy.

After he was reported "Missing, believed killed", after the fall of Hong Kong and of Rangoon, his first wife met another man; later the marriage was dissolved. He is survived by his second wife, Eileen, whom he married in 1947. They had a son.

<p><b>ASHBY, Ronald Robert Willson "Ron"</b></p>   <p>Married 1st (marriage dissolved). Married 2nd Eileen.</p> <p><b>Telegraph.co.uk</b></p>	<p>09.07.1910 Watford, Hertfordshire</p> <p>-</p> <p>01.1998 Wayland, Norfolk</p>	<p>S.Lt. 14.01.1936</p> <p>T/Lt. 23.11.1937</p> <p>T/Lt.Cdr. 1942?</p> <p>T/A/Cdr. 1944?</p> <p>T/Cdr. 01.04.1946</p>	<p>Education: King's School, Canterbury. Joined Benskins, family firm of brewers at Watford, soon leaving to work in Canton.</p>
	<p>1936</p> <p>joined, Hong Kong Naval Volunteer Force</p>	<p>13.10.1942 Harbour attack Hong Kong</p> <p>10.07.1945 operations Arakan coast 44-45</p> <p>28.07.1944 Arakan Coastal Forces</p> <p>28/7/44 Med</p>	<p>24.02.1939 Hon Aide-de-Camp of the Governor of Hong Kong</p> <p>12.02.1940 - (1942) HMS Tamar, later HMS Tamar III (RN base, Hong Kong):</p> <p>(04.1940) for Motor Torpedo Boats</p> <p>(02.1941) - (1942) Commanding Officer, MTB 07 (withdrew his MTB from Hong Kong)</p> <p>01.07.1942 - (02.1943) HMS Aggressive (Coastal Forces base, Newhaven):</p> <p>10.07.1942 - (1942) Commanding Officer, SGB 4 (steam gun boat)</p> <p>01.01.1943 - 11.1943 Commanding Officer, HM MTB 670 (motor torpedo boat) &amp; Senior Officer, 33rd MTB Flotilla (Southampton, then Felixstowe.</p>

					then Mediterranean)
			27.11.1943 -	07.1944	Naval Officer-in-Charge, Chittagong [HMS Salsette (Combined Operations base, Bombay)]
			07.1944	(07.1945)	Senior Officer Coastal Forces (Arakan) [HMS Lanka (RN base, Colombo, Ceylon)]
			21.03.1946 -	20.08.1946	Commanding Officer, HMS Boxer (fighter direction ship)
			23.06.1947 -	(10.1947)	Commanding Officer, HMS Duncansby Head (repair ship)