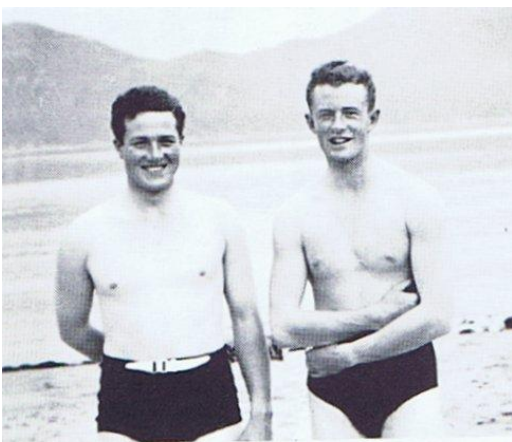


## The MTB Incident a matter of minutes

by Buddy Hide Jr ©

Britain was now at war with Germany, and much of southern China was occupied by the Imperial Japanese Army. As dawn broke on 6<sup>th</sup> October 1939, the islands of Hong Kong, the British trading post in the Orient and home to the Royal Navy China Station, came into view on the port bow of HMT *Ettrick*. Launched in 1938, the 11,279 ton *Ettrick* was the only P&O vessel designed as a troopship for permanent government charter. Among the military personnel on board from Singapore were two rookie RNVR officers, Sub Lieutenant Alexander Kennedy, and Midshipman Charles Dobson, both men from the Clyde Division. Kennedy was destined for the *2nd MTB Flotilla*, Dobson for HMS *Thracian*. Before the month was out both would witness a bizarre incident involving a Motor Torpedo Boat as it patrolled the minefields protecting the approaches to the colony.

The Hong Kong Naval Volunteer Force, the forerunner of the HKRNVR had been actively recruiting



*Dobson & Kennedy – Hongkong, 1939*

members from the Royal Hong Kong Yacht Club since the mid 1930's, allowing the more experienced RN officers to return to Britain for more pressing duties in the European theatre.

The China Station protected the shipping lanes and navigable rivers of southern China, where it operated flotillas of shallow draft gun boats. The MTB's were armed with a paired Lewis-Guns mounted on the bow and a second pair on the stern, two 18 inch torpedoes, with warheads fitted, and three depth charges mounted either side on the upper deck. The flotilla assisted in deterring pirates, smugglers and frequent incursions by Japanese merchant ships clearly probing the colonies defences. They also assisted in settling land disputes on

the many islands of Hong Kong.

Their primary role now was the daily inspection of the mine fields laid to protect the shipping lanes within the colony. The mines were a mixture of contact and controlled mines, the latter activated remotely from shore based mine watch stations manned by Warrant Officers. Mines that came adrift were detonated by rifle fire.

Early in the forenoon of 25<sup>th</sup> October, four boats of the *2nd MTB Flotilla* slipped from the Kowloon camber for their daily patrol. "Winds light, seas calm, visibility good" recorded Lt R A M Hennessy RN in the Fair Log of *MTB 07*. Lt Harris RN, commanding *MTB 11* proceeded to the dockyard on Hong Kong Island to embark a surveyor to verify the position of the minefield marker buoys. Their first survey was the northern approach to the West Lamma Channel, south of Hong Kong Island. As they

were standing into the entrance a loud explosion was heard aft. The startled C/O immediately called down from the bridge to stop engines.



**Left:** Lt R. A. M. Hennessy RN and crew of *MTB 07*

With the engine-room flooding, the £25,000 Motor Torpedo Boat began to settle by the stern. The stoker on watch, whose only visible injuries were cuts and bruises, was hauled out in a state of shock. No other casualties were reported and the explosion in the

engine-room remained a mystery.

The Telegraphist put out a message in plain language, stating that the boat had suffered a catastrophic engine-room explosion, cause unknown. The Commodore, Capt A M Peters DSC RN, declared an emergency, ordering HMS *Thracian* along with a Dan-laying cutter nearby and the other three boats of the flotilla to close in and assist as necessary. Steam tugs from the harbour were also sent to assist. The MTB flotilla leader, Lt-Cdr Nobby Clark RN, in *MTB 10*, with his newly appointed 1<sup>st</sup> Officer, Sub-Lt Kennedy, set a course towards the stricken vessel. The injured rating was transferred to the cutter. Hawsers were passed under the vessel, now stern-under, and made fast to MTB's either side, forming a supporting cradle. HMS *Thracian* led the motley flotilla back to base emitting haunting sounds from her wailing air horns. *MTB 11*'s loose stern could be seen visibly crabbing from side to side.

After being hoisted onto the wall of the camber and cradled, an inspection showed the full extent of the mysterious explosion. A six inch diameter hole through the stern transom above the pennant numbers indicated a hit by a shell. It had cut through a fire extinguisher and shattered on impact with the starboard engine. The Napier Sea-Lion 500HP W12 engine was blown across the engine room, landing on top of the port engine. The starboard torpedo, mounted in its cradle slung from the deck-head, suffered damage to the warhead with the detonator being knocked off. Fearing a second explosion, the detonator was promptly heaved overboard. The shattered remains of the shell exited through the hull, leaving a gaping hole measuring over twelve feet (4m) in length, running from the deck-head to below the waterline. Although the shell was high explosive, it was plugged, not fused.



With *MTB 11* undergoing a lengthy refit, Lt Harris RN was appointed Executive Officer to HMS *Seamew*, stationed with the West River flotilla at Canton.

Sub-Lt C J Collingwood RN, late of HMS *Speedy*, 1<sup>st</sup> Minesweeper Flotilla in the Mediterranean, was promoted to Lieutenant and appointed to *MTB 11* as 2<sup>nd</sup> in command of the flotilla. The incredible sequence of events that led to the mysterious explosion came to light at the subsequent Board of

Enquiry.

The Coastal Defence battery on Mt Davis covering the West Lamma Channel was commanded by a British Officer with Indian gun crews. Watching from 7,000 yards away the Battery Commander spotted the MTB standing into the newly laid West Lamma Channel mine field and reported it to the Extended Defence Officer. Mindful of a delay experienced earlier in the day, the XDO ordered the Battery Commander to put a shot across the MTB's bow, warning it to stop immediately.

It transpired the Battery Commander had correctly calculated the distance, speed and offset required to put a shot 200 yards off the starboard bow. The Indian Gun Trainer however, was not familiar with the practice of firing warning shots, and so removed the offset, thus reducing the elevation by a matter of minutes. The Commander gave the order to fire, and, much to his horror scored a direct hit.

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