

## A Matter of Minutes

IN OCTOBER 1939 a defensive field of moored mines was being laid across the West Lamma Channel — one of the approaches to Hong Kong — by a local Defence destroyer, HMS *Thracian*.

Early in the forenoon of 25 October HM Motor Torpedo Boat No. 11, having embarked a Surveying Officer, sailed from Hong Kong to rendezvous with the destroyer and check on the progress of the minelaying operation. MTB 11 was a sixty-foot Scott Paine boat with an armament of two 18-inch torpedoes which were embarked, with warheads fitted, and eight Lewis guns. She was powered by three Napier-Lion 500 h.p. petrol engines, the centre engine being mounted, facing aft, abaft the other two and driving its propellor through a Vee-drive. In these early boats the torpedoes were fitted with small wheels and stowed, facing forward, on rails in the engine room. The rails ran aft to the transom where there were removable ports and were extended astern by hinged outriggers which could be secured on deck when not required. Torpedoes were 'fired' by removing a chock from one wheel and accelerating the boat. The starting lever was actuated as the torpedo ran out stern first. The design of the wheels and outrigger rails was such that the torpedo dropped horizontally when clear of the transom and then ran under the boat. A simple deflection sight was fitted on the bridge and the boat was 'aimed off' as required.

It was a clear, calm, autumn day and all seemed well with the World to those on board the MTB which was proceeding towards the rendezvous at her normal cruising speed of 25 knots. The destroyer and a dan-laying motor cutter were in sight about three miles ahead.

Suddenly there was a loud explosion, the boat lost way rapidly and the engine controls were put to 'stop' in the wheelhouse. A quick examination revealed that there was a hole in the starboard side of the engine room about twelve feet long,

extending from the upper deck to below the waterline; the boat remained afloat although flooded and with much of the upper deck awash from the forward bulkhead of the engine room to the stern. The watch-keeper in the engine room was quickly hauled out but, miraculously, was found to be suffering only from shock and a few abrasions. He was the only casualty. Those on board MTB 11 were completely baffled as to the cause of the damage. If she had hit a 'rogue' mine which had somehow dragged out of position she would have been blown to pieces. The torpedoes and their warheads were apparently intact, so the only possible, but most unlikely, cause seemed to be that the pistol from the starboard warhead had somehow become detached and its charge had exploded on hitting the hot engine below it. This possibility was discounted when a further examination under water showed not only that the pistol was still in place but that the starboard engine had been torn from its bearers and deposited on top of the port one.

An emergency signal was made by radio, in plain language, to Commodore Hong Kong reporting an internal explosion, cause unknown, and requesting immediate assistance. This signal was intercepted by the Senior Officer of the Second MTB Flotilla who was at sea in the area with three boats in company. These arrived on the scene within half an hour. In the meantime HMS *Thracian* and the motor cutter stood by the damaged boat, the cutter coming alongside and transferring the wounded man, confidential books, etc., to the destroyer.

The bulkhead between MTB 11's flooded engine room and the next compartment forward which contained the main fuel tanks, with the wheelhouse and bridge above it, held firm and the boat seemed to be in no immediate danger of sinking. She was therefore lashed between two MTBs and the trio proceeded under escort to



Hong Kong without further incident, although her damaged and flooded after end wobbled from side to side in a rather alarming way.

A lifting cradle and crane were ready in the dockyard and the boat was lifted carefully onto the wall. It was only then that the cause of the damage was revealed, though not as yet the bizarre circumstances which led up to it.

There was a six-inch diameter hole in the centre of the transom, close to the pendant numbers, obviously made by a projectile which had then neatly cut a two-gallon fire extinguisher in half (for some reason the author remembers this particularly), hit the bearers of the starboard engine and broken up (fortunately the shell, although HE, was plugged not fused). The effect of this was to throw the starboard engine on top of the port one, rip open the starboard warhead and finally blow a large hole in the boat's side. A few more minutes of elevation of the gun would have resulted in a hit in the main fuel tanks below the wheelhouse and a different ending. The difference between life and death was, indeed, a Matter of Minutes. It was only at the subsequent Board of Enquiry that an almost incredible sequence of events came to light.

The Coast Defence battery on Hong Kong Island which covered the West Lamma channel was commanded by a British Officer but with Indian gun crews. On sighting the MTB, the Battery Commander reported to the Extended Defence Headquarters that there was an MTB apparently standing into the new minefield and requested instructions. There had been some delay by the battery earlier in the day in bringing-to an armed yacht which was approaching a controlled minefield closer inshore, so the Duty Officer at HQ, appreciating that MTBs

normally moved fast and that there might not be much time, ordered the battery to fire a shot across her bows immediately.

The Battery Commander decided that to ensure the splash was seen he would put the shell about 200 yards over on the starboard bow. At this time the boat's range was about 7,000 yards, inclination almost zero and speed 25 knots. A speed of 20 knots was set and deflection 20 degrees right. The gun trainer, however, looking through his telescope realised that the deflection ordered would cause the shell to miss the target which surely could not be the intention — control had obviously made an error — so he removed the deflection setting and brought the gun back onto the target. This action, combined with an under estimation of speed and the initial decision to put the splash so close to the target completed the recipe for disaster — a direct hit at 7,000 yards range. The Battery Commander's horror — and surprise — may well be imagined.

MTB 11 was repaired in time to defend Hong Kong against the Japanese assault in December 1941. After expending her torpedoes and ammunition she withdrew, with other survivors of her flotilla to Mirs Bay, North of Hong Kong. Here the boats were destroyed by the survivors of their crews who then made their way overland to Indo China and thus lived to fight another day.

There was one happy sequel; the Commanding Officer at the time of the accident in 1939 was appointed Executive Officer of a gunboat on the West River (HMS *Seamew*) in which he served until early 1940, got married at Canton and returned to the U.K. to get on with the war. He has just celebrated his 45th Wedding Anniversary.

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