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Call the Hands

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Salvage of the German Seehunde Midget Submarine

Roger Buxton, an active member of the Society's Victorian Chapter obtained the original, report of the 1945 recovery of a German Seehunde class midget submarine by Lieutenant V J Steele RNVR. The original is held by the Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies Victorian library. The following is a condensed version of the report.

On Saturday, 27 January 1945 a German midget submarine became stranded on the Middle Scroby Sand near Great Yarmouth. After firing a demolition charge in the submarine, the two crew members surrendered to authorities. LEUT Steele, on night duty in the Admiralty, was ordered to proceed to Great Yarmouth, where he arrived the following day and reported to Rear Admiral Sir Dudley North, Flag Officer in Charge (FOIC) Great Yarmouth. By this time the prisoners had left for London under escort, but the "Kommando" prefix to the official numbers on their identity discs indicated that they were members of the *Kommando der Kleinkampfverbeende*, known to operate midget submarines. The FOIC placed RML 492 at LEUT Steele's disposal and expressed his wish that a careful search be made of the area.

At 0900 on Monday, accompanied by LCDR Smith (RMSO Nore Command) and LEUT Rollings (Salvage Officer to FOIC Great Yarmouth), LEUT Steele left harbour in the RML and for an hour cruised up and down, but the Middle Scroby was awash at all states of the tide and they were unable to locate the submarine. It was now decided to try the North Scroby and as it was an hour before low water the sand was dry for about three miles in length and one mile in width. Almost at once, a black object was sighted on the South East tip of the bank and closing inshore very gingerly they could easily see the outline of hull and conning tower in the sand. Not caring to risk the RML in such waters, the three went away in the dingy and after a very wet approach, landed close to the submarine.



Submarine almost submerged in sand

A preliminary examination showed that the submarine was approximately 40 feet in length by 5 feet in diameter and built of about ¼ inch plate, and for that reason alone quite different to the much smaller Bieber class he had recovered at Dover in January. The prisoners had fired the scuttling charge and blown out a whole section of 4-6 feet abaft the conning tower; otherwise the submarine was relatively intact. The submarine was about 60 percent submerged in the sandbank, bows buried but on an even keel. Probing on the port side suggested a torpedo, but nothing was felt on the starboard side.



Tidal conditions while probing for torpedo

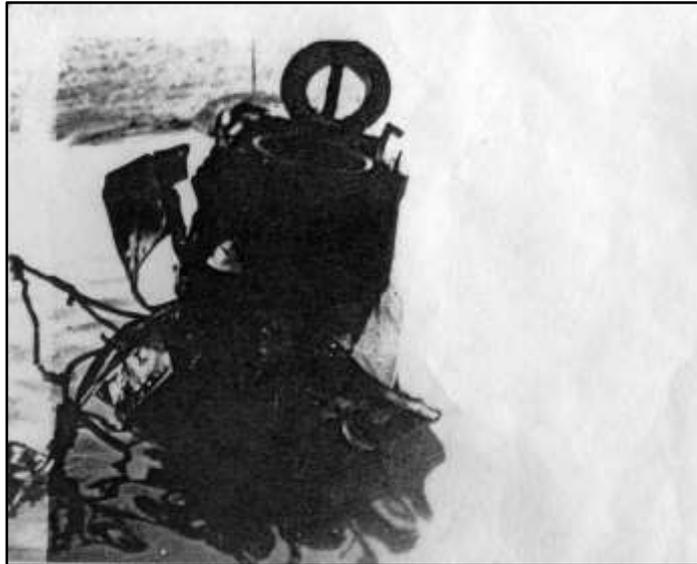
LEUT Rollings suggested that it might be necessary to cut the submarine into sections, but as the only other specimen, wrecked at Walcheren, was proving almost impossible to salvage, and as the submarine was required for intelligence, LEUT Steele decided to attempt recovery. Returning to harbour, he placed plans for the recovery before the Admiral. These plans required the use of a bulldozer and/or excavator and a heavy landing craft of the LCT Mk V type for transport. The Admiral approved these plans and ordered two LCTs from Harwich, LCM 987 as light transport from Lowestoft and a working party of 20 Naval Commandos. Major Bullivant, Army Liaison Officer to FOIC Great Yarmouth arranged for CAPT Tregonning and a D7 Bulldozer and a D8 Tractor and LEUT Rollings laid on the necessary pumps.

The weather then broke and it was Friday before any attempt could be made to leave harbour. On Friday afternoon they left harbour, but by the time the harbour entrance was reached it was clear that the sea was too rough and that the Leading Seaman in charge was unfit to take charge of the craft, much less to make a landing in the shoal waters round the Scroby. The Chief of Staff arranged for a Combined Operations Officer, LEUT Heddle, to take command and operations were postponed until a suitable tide at 1730 on Saturday. LEUT Heddle made a landing just as the wreck was drying out and within two minutes of landing the commandos were digging out the port side of the submarine. Shortly before low water they were down to the torpedo and could feel the warhead and pistol but could not sight either due to the volume of water draining into the excavation. The 4" pump refused to suck up a drop of water and was abandoned. In normal sand it might have been possible to get the pistol out, but this sand was virtually fluid and impossible to control with shovels.

As low water on Sunday was after dark, it would only be possible to work for 30 minutes, so Sunday was spent loading the LCT with the bulldozer, D8 tractor, Somerville Track and timber etc. Switching to the a.m. tide, they landed on the Scroby again at 0815 on Monday. This time they had borrowed two hand fire pumps from Royal Naval Barracks Great Yarmouth, and as soon as water began to collect in the diggings, these pumped it out most effectively. LEUT Steele wanted to sight the torpedo and pistol before bringing in the bulldozer to do the digging as he did not feel justified in bringing such a mass of machinery close to the pistol without having some idea of the state of the torpedo, which might have been damaged by the scuttling charge.

They were able to work until 1100 on Monday, and by this time LEUT Steele had sighted the warhead and part of the body of the torpedo. He could feel net cutters, and in the light of previous experience expected a pistol of the Pi 2 series but was surprised to note that the warhead appeared to be steel instead of the expected bronze, and so the pistol could be either a Pi 1, a Pi 2 or even a Pi 3. The flood tide ended further exploration and they returned to harbour.

On Tuesday morning the “convoy” sailed at 0700 and both LCTs made a perfect landing, eventually lying high and dry on level sand only 300 yards from the scene of operations. The bulldozer went to work digging a deep sump 20 feet from the submarine to drain water from the excavation round the submarine, exposing the whole of the topside of the torpedo and LEUT Steele observed that the pistol was of the Pi 2 series and that the warhead was of aluminum instead of the usual bronze, a combination not previously seen. It was then too late to continue digging, so, with the Admiral’s permission, LEUT Steele decided to stay on the Sands all night, working the P.M. tide by flood lights.



Booby trap explosion

By 1730 the tide had ebbed sufficiently to start digging, so two 3” pumps set to work to drain the sump dug that morning and – now that it had been ascertained that the primer and detonators were in the fully withdrawn position – the bulldozer set to work digging a second sump as close to the torpedo as possible without striking it. Bulldozing was to be continued until shortly after the start of the flood, when LEUT Steele planned to dig out the torpedo and haul it clear before starting on the submarine. Within 15 minutes, however, their luck changed for the worse: both pumps seized up, some hidden and previously unsuspected source of water emptied itself into the sump and submerged everything, and it began to rain heavily.

Although very nearly on the point of giving up, as the LCTs provided a base, LEUT Steele ordered all hands to turn in and decided to make one final effort in the morning.

On surveying the scene before breakfast and seeing that the whole of one side of the submarine was exposed above sand, if not above water, he decided to loosen the sand on the starboard side and using a heavy wire pendant to the conning tower, pull the whole submarine, together with its torpedo, clear of the hole. By 0900 the starboard side was bulldozed until water started to seep through from the other side, and then using 150 fathoms of wire to the conning tower, cleared all hands away and pulled with both vehicles. Twice the wire parted, but on the third attempt the fore part of the submarine lifted from its bed, and leaving the torpedo behind, slid up a timber ramp onto firm sand and was towed across the bank to the landing craft. The after part of the submarine gave some extra trouble because of its awkward shape and the fact that the hydroplanes had dug deeply into the sand, but, again, the pull of both vehicles prevailed and soon that part also lay at the foot of the LCT ramps. LEUT Steele could see that there was little hope of recovering the torpedo on that tide, and after

several abortive attempts to get a strop round the tail, it was left with a buoy shackled to the propeller.

Loading the submarine into the LCTs proved more difficult than anticipated, as the structure of the ramps and the many projections on the side of the submarine seemed created for the sole purpose of fouling each other, but with the projections unwelded and with the D8 pulling from inside the LCTs and the bulldozer pushing, both sections of the submarine were hauled aboard.



Live torpedo exposed

It was disappointing not to have completed the operation, but the hands had had enough after a day of 30 hours, so all returned to harbour for the night, knowing that recovering the torpedo next day was something of a long gamble as the torpedo now lay in liquid sand at the bottom of a hole some ten feet deep and 100 feet in diameter and if the tide filled in the hole overnight the sand would be too soft to support the bulldozer.

Landing the next morning, the hole was still there, and the 4" pump now worked well and pumped out and kept the hole fairly clear of water. Then came the bad news: the bulldozer had blown its main gasket and, as the D8 had to be push started by the bulldozer, it was a question of digging with shovels or the torpedo was gone for good.

This was considered a major disaster, but thanks to the untiring efforts of CPO Spriggs and his party, some 25 shovels were massed, and in two hours the topside of the torpedo was exposed again, but it proved impossible to get any further as the fluid sand ran in and everyone was sunk in it up to his knees. However, by driving a probe down one side and jamming a strop in the other the strop was secured round the torpedo. Then all hands, including officers, kept on digging while the RMS Party dragged a bower anchor from the nearest LCT and buried it up to its ring. Using this as an anchor for a threefold purchase and hauling away, the torpedo came out and was hauled up onto some planks.

LEUT Steele then rendered the torpedo safe, withdrawing the pistol with some difficulty. While the torpedo was being loaded into an LCT by CPO Spriggs and his party he withdrew the primer and detonators from the pistol, and the operation now being completed, he signaled the FOIC to that effect and returned to harbour.

LEUT Steele completed his report by complementing all involved on "pulling his weight and just a little more" and pointing out "that although the rendering safe procedure for pistols of the Pi 2 series lays down that this should be done by remote control, it is my experience that this cannot be done. The pistol normally fits so tightly into the pistol pocket, apart from the corrosion which sets up around the joint, that the only way to withdraw it is to lever it out with a screwdriver. This is the second occasion when I have been obliged to do this."