

OCCASIONAL PAPER 25

Call the Hands

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Recovery of German Midget Submarine and Torpedo, Dover, January 1945 Report by LEUT J.V.Steele RNVR, DTM(I)

Roger Buxton, an active member of the Society's Victorian Chapter has obtained two original, typed reports of the 1945 recovery of German Bieber and Seehund class midget submarines by Lieutenant J.V. Steele RNVR. These were provided by the son of James Steele who also served in the Royal Canadian Navy. The originals and photographs are now in the Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies Victorian library. The following is a condensed version of the Bieber recovery at Dover in 1945 prepared by Roger Buxton.

Captain James Verdon Steele GM CD RCN (ret'd) was born in Tralee, Ireland and after a brief stint in the Merchant Navy, joined the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve in 1940. He became a Torpedo Specialist and served both in the Mediterranean and in Arctic convoys. As Navigating Officer in HMS Bedouin, he was torpedoed and sunk off the island of Pantelleria. After commanding a local escort group based in Gibraltar, he was appointed to the Admiralty to join the Bomb and Mine Disposal Section. This group was responsible for all unexploded ordinance below the high water mark around the UK, and in the general London area in support of the Army. When the German Navy perfected the electrically driven torpedo which left no visible track, he was inserted into Occupied Europe to confirm suspicions that a factory in Northern Germany, ostensibly making dental equipment, was in fact manufacturing the key parts of this new weapon. He remained behind enemy lines working with the Resistance until the liberation. After the war, he transferred to the Royal Canadian Navy and served there until his retirement in 1962 when he went on to a second career in ship brokering and the development of oil spill recovery vessels. He was awarded the George Medal by H.M. King George VI for his rendering safe the midget submarines used in the attacks on UK South Coast ports.



LEUT Steele with Biber submarine.
Note: snow and harbour partly frozen

The reports of the recovery and rendering safe the two midget submarines, written by CAPT Steele (then LEUT Steele RNVR), have survived and are fascinating reading. Not at all boring official reports, they are written in a style showing the 'no nonsense' character of the writer, the way all hands pitched in to achieve the objective as well as the timeless operation of Murphy's Law! Unfortunately the reports are too long to include verbatim, so they have been summarized for publication as Occasional Papers.

Reporting to the Admiralty from leave at midnight on 29 December, LEUT Steele was informed that a German midget submarine, believed to be of the Bieber Class, was under tow in the Channel en route to Dover. The Admiralty required all specimens intact, so after collecting tools and gear he departed

for Dover by road, where he reported to the Duty Commander at 0635. It was believed that the tug and tow were at anchor because of thick fog, but his breakfast was interrupted by an urgent call saying that the tug and tow were approaching Dover, and that he was to board a launch and take over the tow outside the harbour and beach the submarine close to windward of the hulk of the destroyer CODRINGTON, which had been bombed and beached in the harbour in 1940.

Meeting the tug and tow outside the harbour, he was informed that the tug did not intend to pass the tow and did not intend to beach the submarine. LEUT Steele, noticing that the submarine was becoming lower in the water and appeared to be sinking, advised the tug to make for the beach. Instead the tug anchored before getting under way again, the tow parted and the submarine disappeared beneath the surface. Dan buoys were laid to mark the estimated position of the submarine and a naval diving party from HMS VERNON was requested as a civilian diver in deep water diving dress could not be used because the submarine was suspected of carrying a magnetic mine.

When the search resumed next day, the marker dan buoys had disappeared due to heavy overnight traffic, and an ASDIC search was carried out to locate the submarine. A contact of sorts was obtained at 1330 on 31 December and a diver went down, to surface an hour later to report very bad diving conditions, much mud and no sign of the submarine. While awaiting the arrival of the mine recovery yacht ESMERALDA, equipped with special ASDIC which should be able to easily detect the submarine, it was decided to carry out a bottom 'A' sweep between two launches the next morning, 1 January. A systematic sweep was carried out and at 1020 the sweep caught fast on an obstruction and the launches held the sweep in position by going slow ahead while waiting for the diving vessel to arrive.

At about 1110 the cross-channel train ferry appeared in the harbour entrance and was obviously going to have a very tricky entry if she was to avoid running the launches down. The sweep was shortened in to allow the ferry to pass uncomfortably close, but as it passed the sweep wire freed and contact was lost. Sweeping recommenced at 1345 and at 1430 the sweep again fouled the wreck. At 1600 the diver went down his shot rope and resurfaced later to report that the sweep was embedded in the mud and that he had been unable to follow it to the obstruction.

The following day, 2 January ASDIC and wire sweeping were unable to locate the submarine, and the divers had been down at the position of the previous day's contact, but could find nothing. Sweeping continued unsuccessfully on 3 January, but plans were made for beaching the submarine – when it could be found – close westward of the hulk of the destroyer CODRINGTON. Somewhat unusually elaborate precautions had to be taken as the position of beaching was exactly in front of the sole remaining hotel in Dover, and the shell shattered buildings on the sea front could not be expected to stand up to the explosion of a mine or torpedo at a maximum range of 150 yards.

On 3 January ESMERALDA reported a first class contact, and from the echo sounder trace it appeared that the wreck lay in a hollow, close under an almost vertical wall of mud. For the first time hopes were high, and during the afternoon divers attempted to reach the wreck, but bad weather (wind force 6) and the difficulty of getting into the hollow frustrated these attempts.

Wire sweeping of the entire area had continued, and on 4 January the sweep fouled an obstruction, but this proved to be an LCP, lost in August 1944. The diving party had now laid a system of lines across the wreck in the hollow so that divers could climb down the mud bank, and at 1630 the divers were ready to go down when the bottom sweeping party reported its sweep fast on a wreck. By this time it was nearly dusk, and snowing intermittently, so the sweep wire was left fast to the wreck but well and truly danned.

On Saturday 5 January two divers began a search of the wreck in the hollow, and SBLT Williams went down the danned sweep wire. At 1230 SBLT Williams surfaced to report that he had found the submarine, lying on her starboard side in about 6 ½ fathoms. LEUT Gray, the other diving officer from

HMS VERNON, reported that the submarine was carrying an external torpedo fitted in a form of strop release. LEUT Steele deduced that the torpedo pistol was a non-contact magnetic type, and was disturbed to hear, that despite orders to the contrary, he had “tested” the movement of the arming vane by rotating it. If the torpedo dropped clear on lifting the submarine, the torpedo could well be fully armed.

Preparing the submarine for lifting took all day Sunday and on Monday the Dover salvage vessel DAPPER lifted the submarine and, when she decided she was as near to the beach as safety permitted, lowered the submarine to the bottom again and passed the lifting wires to the CODRINGTON. This was at 1930. The submarine had been beached farther from the beach than intended, and there was some doubt that the conning tower would break surface at all. The tide was now ebbing and at 2200 the top of the periscope appeared, and at midnight, with no sign of the conning tower, the wire to the fore end of the submarine was passed to the shore, across the beach and to a towing truck waiting of the road. It was now snowing, and freezing hard, and the tow truck could not hold the road, but by wedging a truck with an electric winch against a local war memorial, and hauling away handsomely the fore part of the submarine was soon clear of the water. LEUT Steele now cleared all hands off the beach into a pillbox and began a detailed examination of the pistol and the torpedo.



Live magnetically actuated pistol before removal and rendering safe

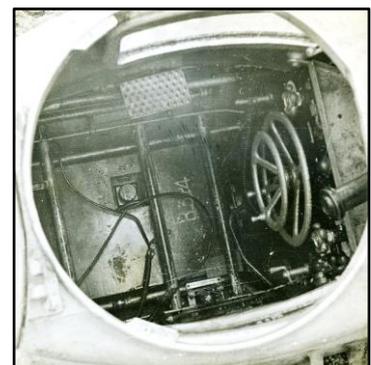
He forced the starting lever into the ‘off’ position and held it in place with a timber wedge. The primer and detonators were not in the withdrawn position, but had been wound down 315 out of a possible 355 revolutions, so he backed this arming range. Using a modified mine “bomb-fuze” spanner he removed the four bolts holding the net cutters to the nose, withdrew the pistol retaining bolts, built a ramp of shingle and an old cushion, and using the prescribed lanyard (reduced to 200 feet due to the lack of space), withdrew the pistol.



Magnetically actuated torpedo pistol now removed

As the tide was now on the flood, the torpedo was hauled up the beach onto the roadway. Before attempting to haul the submarine up the beach and to crane it onto a railway flat car (fortunately the railway separated the beach from the road) it was decided to pump out the submarine. No amount of persuasion would shift the conning tower hatch clamps, but it was possible to break the Perspex scuttle, remove the body of the pilot when it jammed the opening, and then pump out completely. LEUT Steele noted that, while the body of the pilot was being removed, ‘it was most interesting to observe the reaction of the ratings, who had spent most of their service doing excellent work but in shore establishments, as against those who were only ashore because their previous close contact with the Hun had left them maimed for life.’

An inspection of the submarine revealed a scuttling charge with a nine second delay fuze and an unidentified explosive device with a one second delay fuze. LEUT Steele now returned to the pistol, took it along the beach away from the ever gathering number of “Interested Persons”, and withdrew the primer and detonators. He was now able to make his final report to the Chief of Staff, but before returning to London, a query from the Admiralty required him to climb inside the torpedo to determine the number and type of batteries.



Booby trap lies under the numbered panel

The report concludes as follows:

Throughout the whole operation one thought was very much in mind, viz. How exceptionally thoughtful and helpful everyone was in Dover, and in particular LEUT Commander Powell, and LEUT Parker. I cannot speak too highly of their efforts, not only to provide the very best gear, and in good supply, but to anticipate my every wish. They, and their working party, under the direction of PO Humphrey, worked tirelessly, and with an enthusiasm that was a pleasure to watch. Quite early on the Monday evening most of the party got wet almost to the waist, but despite the freezing cold, not one would leave the scene of operations until the job had been completed

LEUT Parker calls for special mention, in that with the approval of his Chief of Staff he volunteered to help me to relay the skidway whilst the live torpedo was being dragged up the beach, and later to assist in unscrewing the pistol from the head.



Recovery of Biber completed. Hulk of destroyer CODRINTON in background

This is only a summary of the recovery operation, and omits most of the technical information about disarming the torpedo, all of which may be found in the full report on the web site.