

### H.M.S. CHARYBDIS

DIDO CLASS ANTI AIRCRAFT LIGHT CRUISER  
DISPLACEMENT 5700 TONS. SPEED 33KNOTS.  
ARMAMENT 8 X 4.5" GUNS IN FOUR MOUNTINGS.  
MANY LIGHT AA WEAPONS.  
BUILT BY CAMELL LAIRD, BIRKENHEAD  
LAID DOWN JULY 1940  
COMMISSIONED NOVEMBER 1941

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H.M.S.Charybdis saw a great deal of action in her two years of existence. After working up at Scapa Flow during the winter of 1941 she covered minelaying operations in the Northern Approaches before leaving in the Spring of 1942 for the Mediterranean. Based on Gibraltar she carried out many patrols for surface raiders and on convoy duties.

In June she took part in Operation Harpoon to run a convoy through to Malta with a strong escort. This was vital to keep the island going but in spite of a fierce defence by the escort against continuous air, submarine and E boat attacks only two merchant ships got through.

Two months later an even stronger force of two battleships, five aircraft carriers, seven cruisers and twenty eight destroyers were assembled for Operation Pedestal to fight 14 merchant ships through to the island whose plight was now desperate. After 3 days and nights of battle against all that the German and Italian forces could muster 3 merchant ships reached the island and Malta was saved.

Convoy duties in the Bay of Biscay and South Atlantic followed and in the autumn of 1942 she was back in action supporting the Allied landings at Algiers and later Bizerta. She embarked General Eisenhower the Supreme Commander to take him to the Salerno landings where she was actively engaged in gunfire support and air defence.

A welcome return to Devonport in October 1943 ended in tragedy when she was sunk by two torpedoes fired by German Elbing Class destroyers in the early morning of the 23rd October off the Sept Isles when taking part in Operation Tunnel. 460 of the ships company lost their lives, 107 were saved.

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**H.M.S. LIMBOURNE**

TYPE 3 HUNT CLASS DESTROYER  
DISPLACEMENT 1545 TONS. SPEED 27 KNOTS.  
ARMAMENT 4 X 4". ONE QUADRUPLER 2PDR. 3 X 20MM GUNS.  
1 TWIN TORPEDO TUBE/MOUNTING  
DEPTH CHARGES AND THROWERS  
BUILT BY ALEX STEPHEN, GLASGOW.  
LAID DOWN APRIL 1940  
COMMISSIONED 24TH OCTOBER 1942

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H.M.S.Limbourne was very active in her one year of existence. Even while working up in November 1942 she escorted the battleship H.M.S.Howe to the Mediterranean and returned to the UK as escort for H.M.S.Duke of York and H.M.S.Victorious. She then joined the 15th Destroyer Flotilla based at Devonport where she was flotilla leader for most of the remaining part of her career.

In January and February 1943 she was to be found escorting convoys to Gibraltar and North Africa. She entered Casablanca with the US Navy when they took the port during the North African landings, working to help clear the scuttled ships left behind.

Following repairs in Portsmouth Dockyard to replace a propellor, she escorted the French battleship Le Courbet to the Clyde. The next five months were spent on sweeps off the French coast where she saw action. She was also involved in protecting light forces and anti-submarine patrols in the Bay of Biscay. During one of these patrols north of Morlaix she received slight damage in action with enemy destroyers.

She was eventually lost on 23rd October 1943, the eve of the anniversary of her commissioning, off the Sept Isles during Operation Tunnel. She was torpedoed by the German destroyer T22. The torpedo hit the forward magazine; the resulting explosion blew away all the fore-end structure below the waterline, from just forward of the boiler rooms and fore-castle deck forward of the bridge. Despite this enormous damage, great efforts were made to save the ship but attempts under her own steam or in tow were unsuccessful. At daylight the remaining structure that was still afloat had to be sunk by torpedoes from our own forces to prevent it falling into enemy hands.

From a ship's company of 125, a total of 40 lives were lost; sadly none of the bodies were ever recovered.

## OPERATION TUNNEL

### Background

Operation Tunnel was a set-piece operation controlled by CinC Plymouth that was activated when intelligence or reconnaissance indicated that the Germans would be running a convoy along the French coast between Brest and St.Malo. There were no forces specifically allocated to it nor preparations made for it. CinC Plymouth detailed whatever ships he had available and tactical planning and control was left to whoever might be Senior Officer. Some continuity was provided by the Hunt class destroyers of the local 15th Destroyer Flotilla but their lack of speed and armament lessened their value. The operation was invariably activated with a mixed bag of ships with widely different capabilities few of whom had ever worked together before.

The Germans gave their merchant ships proceeding along the French coast strong escorts of at least four Elbing Class destroyers who worked together as a team plus a close escort of as many large M Class minesweepers as available. An important ship or convoy would also be supported by E boats. The Germans had an excellent radar chain along the coast and the liaison between this and their ships was good. There were several shore batteries with guns of ranges out to 15 miles. The Germans also had the advantage that they could time the sailing of convoys to make the best of light and weather conditions. Their tactics if opposed would be to draw the attacking force away from the convoy while this withdrew close to the coast. If faced with a close quarters situation they fired a full salvo of torpedoes before withdrawing at high speed.

The opposing forces on 21st October 1943

The British forces detailed were:-

Charybdis. An AA cruiser of 33 knots, eight 4.5" guns and a heavy close range AA armament.

Grenville and Rocket. Fleet destroyers of 36 knots with four 4.7" guns and eight torpedo tubes.

Limbourne, Talybont, Wensleydale and Stevenstone. Hunt Class destroyers of 27 knots, four 4" guns and two torpedo tubes

Charybdis had never operated before as a surface force strike leader. Her entire life had been spent in providing heavy AA support mainly in the Mediterranean. She had very little experience or practice at surface actions. Her armament was designed to combat air attack and was smaller than that carried by some of the destroyers. She was not the right type of cruiser for the rough and tumble of a night action.

The two Fleet destroyers were armed almost identically to the T Class (Elbings) which the Germans used in this operation. They both had experience of night fighting in these waters.

The Hunts came from two different flotillas and the Senior Destroyer Officer in Limbourne had only joined his ship a few days before and did not know the other Commanding Officers. He was only able to attend at the end of the pre-sailing conference and had the sketchiest idea of the senior officer in Charybdis' intentions for the operation.

**The German forces were:-**

5 T Class (Elbings) of same capabilities as British Fleet destroyers all from the same flotilla.

6 M Class large minesweepers and

2 V Class patrol vessels fitted with radar, all as the close escort to:-

Munsterland a merchant ship whose safe arrival at Cherbourg was of some importance.

**The opposing operation plans**

The British force was to stay in a rigid column of seven ships 3 cables apart at 17 knots, passing through established points to sweep to the westward along the likely route of any convoy before turning north to return to Plymouth. The Senior Officer intended to keep the force concentrated unless the action developed into a chase to the east. It was the intention to approach unobserved to 6000 yards before illuminating and opening fire. Any torpedo targets were to be engaged by ships individually.

The fact that the Munsterland had sailed and was en route was not known to Charybdis, she was not fitted with equipment to detect German communications and these intercepts by other ships in the force before the action were not passed on to her.

The German intentions were based on their normal overall plan. The Munsterland was to sail from Brest to Cherbourg in easy stages with a close escort of eight minesweepers and patrol vessels. The outer escort of 5 Elbings left Brest later and took up position within visual distance to the north of it. They were instructed to escort her to Lezardrieux that night and then enter St. Malo. Any surface action, even with enemy coastal craft was to be avoided.

The moon rose in the ENE at 0125. It was a clear night until gathering clouds brought rain after the action. There was a SW wind force 2 - 3 until it died away later, with a long heavy swell. These conditions, especially after moonrise favoured the Germans.

**The approach to the action**

The British force left Plymouth at 1900 on the 22nd steering south and at 0030 the next day altered course as planned to the west and reduced to 13 knots remaining in single line ahead. At this point they were detected by the shore radar stations and the position, course, speed and approximate composition of the force passed to the German Escort Force Commander in T 23.

On receiving the shore radar reports, T23 took his force of Elbings about 5 miles north of the convoy route and then proceeded east parallel to it. The oncoming British force would then be silhouetted by the rising moon to the east. A steady flow of radar plots kept him informed of the British movements

**Contact made and action joined**

Charybdis obtained a radar contact ahead at 14,000 yards at 0130 and at the same time Limbourne picked up German radio transmissions indicating that 5 possibly 6 naval units were in the vicinity. The destroyers radar was masked on ahead bearings by Charybdis. These two pieces of vital information were not exchanged so that Charybdis knew there was an enemy seven miles ahead but did not know its composition while Limbourne and some of the destroyers knew there were 5 or 6 enemy destroyers close by, but not where. The complete picture was available but not seen.

At 0135 Charybdis made a signal that she had a radar contact to the west at 8,000 yards. In keeping with his plan to close within 6,000 yards before opening fire, Captain Voelcker held his course, not aware that what he was closing rapidly in on, were destroyers with powerful torpedo armaments waiting for just such an opportunity. Three minutes later the German destroyer leader sighted Charybdis due east of him and turned his force to starboard in to column and increased speed. Charybdis was seen to alter 60 degrees to port and T23 immediately fired a full salvo of six torpedoes at her. At the same time Charybdis opened fire with starshell but was almost immediately struck by one or two torpedoes.

The destroyers following Charybdis were now sighted by the remaining German force who all fired full salvos of 6 torpedos at them without giving away their positions by gunfire. Limbourne was struck by one and Charybdis again by another. The German destroyer force now proceeded to the east and were not seen again. The Munsterland and escort continued undetected and unharmed to Lezardrieux

### **The British force shattered**

Total confusion now reigned in the British force. Manoeuvring signals by Charybdis had not been received or misunderstood by several of the destroyers. Both senior officers' ships were sinking and incommunicado. The rest were charging around at high speed. Starshell were illuminating both friend and foe and torpedo tracks were much in evidence. It was only good fortune that others did not share the fate of Charybdis and Limbourne as 18 torpedoes sped through the line. It was not till nearly an hour later that Grenville realised that he was now the senior officer and took charge. The sinking of Charybdis

The first torpedo hit on the port side and flooded B Boiler Room. She soon assumed a 20 degree list to port. The second torpedo struck further aft and caused very severe damage; the after engine room was flooded, all electric power failed and she quickly listed to 50 degrees. There was no communication with the bridge and abandon ship was ordered. The ship went down very quickly; the Dido Class were renowned for that. She took an angle by the stern until almost vertical staying like that for about half an hour with the bow out of the water, then the bulkheads collapsed and she sank at about 0230. The senior survivor was the Executive Officer, Commander Oddie. The Captain was sighted in the water encouraging the survivors but was not rescued.

### **The struggle to save Limbourne**

The torpedo had struck by the forward magazine which had blown up removing everything forward of the bridge and back to the boiler room below the waterline. Despite the immense size of the explosion and damage, the bulkhead held, she still had steam on and, in spite of the list there was no danger of sinking. The Captain and First Lieutenant were badly concussed and command devolved on Sub Lieutenant Cunliffe-Owen who rose to the occasion splendidly. Communications between the tiller flat and engine room were established and hope was high that she could steam herself clear of the French coast which was in sight five miles to the south. However this was not to be and all efforts either going ahead or astern only resulted in turning in wide uncontrollable circles which seemed to be taking them closer to the enemy coast. They decided to get ready to abandon ship lest she drift ashore and be taken by the Germans intact; the motor boat was lowered and floats made ready. It was now that five destroyers were sighted approaching and it was feared that they were Germans coming back to finish the job. However much to their relief they were the rest of the British force led by Grenville.

### **Subsequent operations by British forces**

After proceeding north to clear the chaos Grenville gathered the others round her. She assumed that the attackers had been E boats which could be waiting by the wrecks of Charybdis and Limbourne to torpedo any ships returning to rescue survivors and signalled the situation to CinC Plymouth. He then heard from Stevenstone that Limbourne was still afloat and without waiting to hear from CinC returned to the scene, requesting air cover at daylight. Talybont made two attempts to tow Limbourne but either from ahead or astern the tow parted as she sheered violently when way was made. Her survivors were taken off, the seacocks were opened and Talybont torpedoed her. Despite this she still floated and it took another torpedo from Rocket to dispatch the tough little ship.

CinC meanwhile ordered Grenville to sweep to the West as it was not clear to him whether the enemy convoy had escaped. Fortunately for the survivors Wensleydale and Stevenstone were left on the scene to search while Grenville and Rocket swept to the West without any result. On their return to the scene at about 0500 they then joined in the rescue attempts for what were now pitifully few survivors as the cold water and oil took their toll. With daylight fast approaching CinC made repeated signals to clear the area northwards but Grenville delayed as long as possible till 0630 when the force left for Plymouth. There was no interference from the Germans either during the rescue attempts or during the return home.

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A modern cruiser and destroyer and 500 lives had been lost. A well trained and drilled enemy force had reduced a superior British force to equality in a few minutes, thrown it into confusion and achieved their object - the safety of the convoy - without firing a gun and no loss to themselves.

So many errors had been made on the British side both ashore and afloat that this incident was used as an illustration in the R.N Tactical School for many years afterwards as a classic example of how to get almost everything wrong.

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### **EVENTS IN GUERNSEY**

During the next few weeks 20 bodies of Charybdis' ships company came ashore on the island, as well as many others along the French coast. The Germans occupying the island were anxious that this should not be used by the islanders as a cause for demonstration and strict orders were given that no one except German military was to attend the funeral. Despite this, the time and place leaked out and a huge crowd assembled to witness the last rites. During these Mr. William de Carteret snatched one of the Union flags on a coffin as it was being lowered into the ground and spirited it away until the war's end.

This was kept carefully for many years and was then presented to St. John's Church by his widow Mrs. Doris de Carteret in 1973 where it has been preserved with other mementos of the occasion

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