

SCU-NEWSLETTER No. 2-19
Wednesday, May 8, 2019

1. 'Slocum's Navy!'

Of all the things I was engaged in during World War II - one of them still troubles me - the disaster at Slapton Sands in Devon. In one night in April 1944 - 749 US Service men died in the bay there in a rehearsal for the assault on Omaha beach that was to follow in June. Of course, I was not involved but I *was* on the beach at Slapton Sands three months later - in late July/early August.

In 'The Secret Wireless War' (Chapter 38), I describe going down to Dartmouth to work on MGBs (Motor Gun Boats) where we installed and tested new wireless gear from MI6 (Section VIII). However, the main test on this occasion was to be with a short-range wireless telephone, similar but smaller than the SOE 'S Phone.' Its aim was to assist ship-to-shore guidance for MGBs and MTBs of 'Slocum's Navy' under its commander, Captain Frank Slocum, the Royal Navy's **Deputy Director of Operations Division (Irregular) (D.D.O.D.) (I)**. In fact, Slocum was already an officer in SIS (Secret Intelligence Service) hence his ability to call on our boss Richard Gambier-Parry - when he wanted help with communications.

So now I want to tell you the full story of our work in Dartmouth in July/August 1944. Then I have decided to write another Newsletter to follow shortly. This will be just about the disaster that befell the US forces training in Devon off Slapton Sands earlier in April 1944, that later became known as the 'Night of the Bloody Tiger.'

'Slocum's Navy' was in ports along the Devon and Cornish coast at Falmouth, Dartmouth, Brixham and in the Helford River their main task was to carry out operations on the shores of north-western France, mostly Brittany. These had several functions:

- (1) To land support and recover, intelligence agents of SOE, SIS and their networks.
- (2) Providing support for arms and support for Resistance groups and fighters.
- (3) Providing a line for escape networks including escaping aircrew, POWs and resistance workers at risk from capture.
- (4) Taking raiding or reconnaissance parties to and from enemy held coasts.

When I was earlier working on making parts for MkVII's at Little Horwood (the 'Factory!') near Whaddon Hall its boss was Hugh Castleman. In his office was a board showing a list of some fifteen to twenty 'MFVs.' I had no idea what those initials meant until later.

MFVs were *Motor Fishing Vessels* - British, Belgian but mostly French that had become part of Slocum's Navy. Some MFVs based in the Scilly Isles, were real fishing vessels, sometimes crewed by British sailors in French clothing and hence could move, *with care*, along the Brittany coast. However, for rapid deployment on most of the roles played by Slocum's Navy, the much faster MTBs and MGBs were used.



Illustrated is a former Brittany fishing vessel fitted with our wireless gear capable of receiving SIS traffic. Although 'SOE' traffic is stated in the only record of the vessel I can find at the moment - I suspect it is inaccurate.

The list of MFVs was in Hugh Castleman's office because at that time, some of his men were occasionally responsible for fitting our wireless gear into them. Others, in different parts of MI6 (Section VIII) were dealing with other work - 'Ascension' in aircraft for example. In fact it was an untidy arrangement. However, with Richard Gambier-Parry's knowledge that D Day was on the horizon and needing at least 14 Mobile Signals Liaison Units (mobile wireless vehicles), meant the overall task became much bigger requiring a full time organisation under one man.

It was then that he formed 'Mobile Construction' at Whaddon Hall and put Dennis Smith in charge of it. Dennis helped to develop some of our sets and was technically one of the most skilled men in MI6 (Section VIII). He had been personally 'headhunted' by Gambier-Parry from Eddystone Radio. He was already heavily involved with 'Ascension' air-to-ground agent wireless that he helped to design and put into operation. I was hugely lucky to be chosen to be one of Dennis's new team of seven - drawn from several parts of MI6 (Section VIII). They had put me into uniform on the day I was legally able - at seventeen and a half. Then I could go to military sites and I started work in aircraft, ships, and on the new wireless trucks for D Day in early 1944 - before I was 18 in May 1944!

Now back to Dartmouth: Captain Slocum's ships, fast like the MTBs and MGBs, or slower like fishing vessels, all had the same problem when approaching the Brittany coast line - bearing in mind they obviously could not use port facilities. It is notorious for some of the fastest tides in the world, littered with rocks, constantly changing wind and weather, thus needing precise navigation in the dark.

They were tasked with some of the duties described above, taking men and material ashore and often taking people off - including sometimes even resistance fighters at risk of capture, along with their families. However, they aimed to choose 'dark moon' periods but of course the enemy knew that and were especially alert.

To locate the coastal party waiting on shore, they used several different methods of communication but lights were out of the question as there were German E-Boats in the Channel and patrols on shore. The 'S Phone' designed for the SOE was rather bulky for those on shore and for the landing craft. I understand they also tried the US Navy RB7 by Emerson Radio of New York - again a large set for dinghy or a party waiting under quite perilous conditions on a beach or on a rocky outcrop.

So our wireless research team in 'Hut 12' in my plan of Whaddon Hall (Chapter 11 on page 73 in the 'The Secret Wireless War') were tasked with finding a solution and the team would include Dennis along with Alfie Willis, Wilf Lilburn and Steve Dorman.

The result was a small hand-held set with a short range - exactly what was required to between the incoming party in rubber dinghy's or the Warrington Smythe SN 1 - 14ft surf boat.

Shown here, it was designed to carry a lot more passengers and/or supplies. The oars were muffled but it must still have been a hairy journey from the MGB - up to two miles offshore to an unknown 'pinpoint' on a notoriously treacherous rocky coast - *in total darkness!*

The sailor's face was obliterated in line with wartime security requirements.

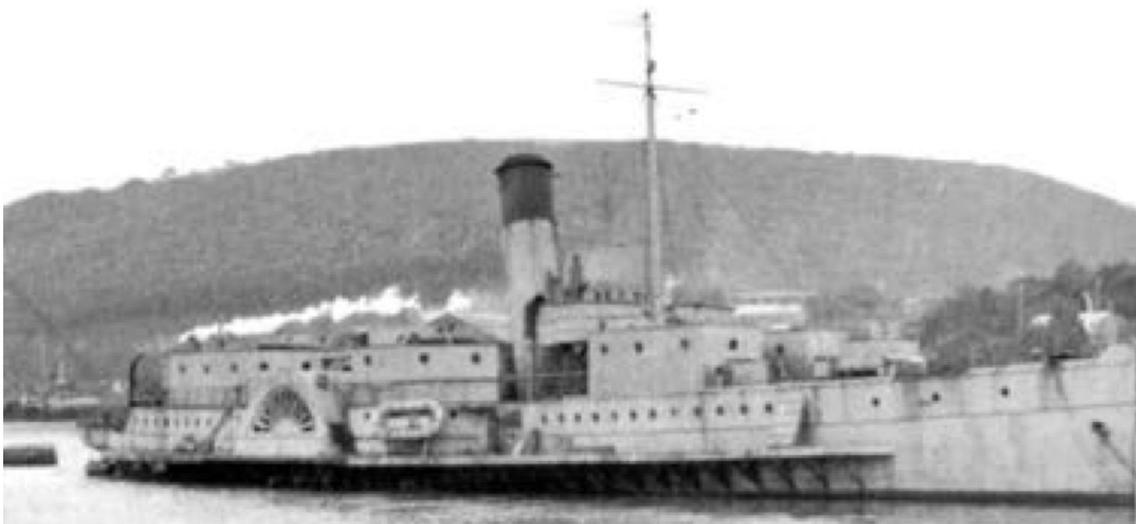


In passing, you should know that Captain Slocum RN banned all SOE independent operations by sea to the west coast of France, he said, for fear of compromising the fishing-vessel operations. This caused even further aggravation between SOE (Special Operations Executive) and SIS (Secret Intelligence Service) already in some disarray. This ban only gave yet another reason for SOE to work with the RAF and use aircraft for many of its operations.

At the end of July or in very early August, Dennis told me to pack for a week or more away, from the next day. We were to go to Dartmouth in Devon to work on MGBs - another new acronym for me! He was to go down one day by Packard, and I was to follow on the next day with a Guy 15 cwt wireless van with a selection of tools and a quantity of wireless gear. The Guy was a beast to drive so thank goodness I had an army pool drive from Little Horwood camp.

Today the drive from Whaddon Hall to Dartmouth would be simple - with detailed maps, signposts, motorways and Sat-Nav. However, we only had army maps and all signposts were removed or blanked out. It was little help asking the way, since you would often get a rude answer, due to the parachutist scare. It was a little easier being in an army vehicle but still you might still find it difficult. Dennis gave me written instructions that I still have today - written on foolscap paper. Only the older ones among you will know what foolscap is - before we thankfully changed over to ISO standards

The dépôt ship of the 15th MGB Flotilla was the pre-war river Dart pleasure paddle steamer, the 'Westward Ho' shown below, Although, it spent much of the war on the Kingswear (eastern) shore of the Dart, when the D Day invasion fleet left the Dart it moved over to the Dartmouth town side. When I went on board the 'Westward Ho' it was moored just off the Dartmouth harbour with three MGBs alongside and three US Navy PT boats moored on the other side, nearer the harbour.



Dennis was already there but had gone out. I was shown a cabin and told that the Sunday lunch had been cleared away long before. However, a chef came along with a metal tray with several shoulders of lamb on it with piles of roast potatoes and told to help myself. Then a sailor asked if I would like a drink and brought me an enamelled mug half full of rum! I had never had rum before and because I was thirsty drank the lot fairly quickly. After the meal and the rum - I staggered to my cabin and do not remember the rest of the day!

Early the following morning Dennis appeared and told me what had to be done. I went aboard the furthest MGB of the three moored alongside. This was MGB 502, the one chosen for our work. My first task was to add a di-pole aerial to those on the mast and that meant clambering up it without much help but fortunately it was not very tall. The aerial was not part of the new telephone test but for other tests being conducted.

I think I should show you the tail end of Dennis' instructions written on foolscap to me - having taken in all the towns along the route. He included 'Hartford Bridge' RAF airfield as he realised that at least I knew my way there having flown with him in B25 Mitchells on 'Ascension' flights, He also showed where we could get refreshments - so typical of this kind man

I have put this in because it mentions Major 'Freddie' Cox from MI6 (Section VIII) at Whaddon and he appeared with several others on the Beach - as other tests were planned and indeed later took place.

Why don't I know what they were? Dennis had chosen me because of my multiple skills, honed under Charlie West at Whaddon Hall and again at Little Horwood. I was a good all-rounder addition to his team but while treated kindly by everyone - I was still easily the youngest in MI6 (Section VIII) - and only told what I needed to know!

When you get to Kingswear
park the car in the yard
opposite a hotel near
called "HMS Breaker". Ask the
~~port~~ sentry to keep an eye
on the car. Then phone
HMS Westward Ho! ask
for Major Cox, if he
is not there ask for
the first Lt. and tell
him that you are from
Section VIII and has he
a boat that he can
send for you.
This boat will take you

The picture is of MGB 502 of the 15th MGB Flotilla of 'Slocum's Navy' based at Dartmouth. The others were MGB 503 and MGB 318.

MGB's 503 and 502 were both built by Camper and Nicholson the world famous yacht building company - the oldest leisure marine builders in the world having been founded in 1782.

However, we worked on MGB 502 and Dennis told me to strap a di-pole aerial on the ship's mast. It was only just below the cross bar but still a trifle hairy.



Now to the start of the tests. I was told the first test was to be off Slapton Sands - an extensive beach some 8 miles west along the coast from Dartmouth. At midday, after I installed the di-pole aerial on the mast - Dennis drove off in the Packard and I followed on in the Guy wireless van to Slapton Sands. This was part of the Hamms area of south Devon where several villages had been cleared of civilians to provide a training ground for US forces. Slapton Sands were chosen as they looked very much like the beaches in Normandy they were to assault on D-Day.

The area contained about 750 families, comprising about 3,000 people, 180 farms, villages, shops, etc. The 30,000 acres had to be cleared of people and livestock in six weeks so that troops could move in and start setting up camps, defence points and ringing the area with guard posts.

The area was still totally closed to civilians and we had to pass through a tight security guard before driving on. We passed through desolate villages that were quite eerie. I recall one large house with the windows blown out but with its net curtains still in place. They were flapping in the stiff breeze off the sea and it seemed like a lot of handkerchiefs waving at us as we passed.

When we arrived at the beach there was already quite a party of Naval and Army officers there including 'Freddie' Cox (see my 'instructions') and Dennis joined them to explain what MI6 (Section VIII) had produced. Off the beach was MGB 502 and Dennis was rowed out to it in a rubber dinghy.

Before he left I was given the new wireless telephone and told to keep talking until he either waved or flashed a light. So as soon as the MGB slowly moved away - I started with the alphabet a few times then counted slowly to 100 several times but soon got tired of that - so sang the following rhyme: "Mary had a little lamb she also had a bear - I have often seen her little lamb but never seen her bare" - Captain Slocum descended on me like the wrath of God - shouting at me to **'Stop that bloody nonsense - immediately!'**

I was about to be in serious trouble with the famously grim Captain Slocum but help came at that very moment - as Dennis flashed a light showing he was out of range. I gathered that the test was over and a success. It proved that the contact was good up to the rather short distance required by Slocum for the brave men manning his ships.

For the first time since I started the SCU-Newsletters back in 1997 - I am adding a short 'Addendum.' This is about the 'fearsome' Captain Slocum - well he was fearsome to me on Slapton Sands!

After the test off Slapton Sands, they decided we needed do a real test of the telephone at sea. So the following night we set off in MGB 502 from Dartmouth and into the English Channel.

Apparently, we were to replicate a dinghy adrift - having left the enemy shore but missing the 'mother' ship waiting in the pitch darkness. It had actually happened, meaning the dinghy somehow had to find its way back to shore and the dispatch party. I cannot emphasise how hazardous the Brittany coast can be away from the ports and main beaches. Many years later I later saw its fast running tides and rock-strewn coast - while on holiday with our sons in Brittany.

I was on the deck as it became dark and as I was not needed at the time - found my way below and the navy telegraphist sitting at his wireless set. He then offered me some rum - again in an enameled mug. This time remembering my earlier rum - I only sipped it just in case I *was* needed.

We had been at sea for perhaps an hour when there was a lot of activity above and I went out on deck. There a very brave sailor was helped into a rubber dinghy - after being handed one of our new sets. A minute or two later we moved away from him. He was supposed to be a 'returning crew' out from Brittany who had lost contact with the mother ship MGB 502. It was so dark that he was quickly lost from sight. Not involved, I went down and sat beside the friendly telegraphist. However, it was obvious even to a non-sailor - the weather had quickly changed - as it often did in mid-channel.

After a few minutes my new friend received a message in Morse en clair and rushed up to the deck - followed by me. He took the message up to the skipper on the bridge where Dennis and Freddie Cox were working. The skipper let out a yell as the message told of a loose mine in the Channel - just where we were cruising. Apparently, it had been spotted by an MFV and only just reported. Two problems; one to try to spot the mine before it hit us and second get our 'lost dinghy' back on board.



The picture shows a floating mine. It would detonate with if a 'spike' even touched a ship - with devastating results.

The entire crew - including Dennis, Freddie Cox and me - were positioned around the ship to try to see the mine. Several sailors had long boat hooks to push it away if it got too close. Dennis was also on his wireless set trying to get the poor sailor in the dinghy back on board. After what seemed like an age - he was alongside and quickly brought aboard to everyone's relief.

The skipper then ordered the ship slowly forward with the entire crew and us three - still on a very anxious look out for the mine. The picture shows what might well have happened *if* it had touched the hull of MGB 502. It would have been blown out of the water and us with it.

As we went carefully forward in what the skipper felt was the danger area - one had also be on the lookout for the German 'E Boats' - that were still active in the Channel. 'E Boat' was a British name for them '*Enemy Boat*' and they were designed for several theatres of operation including the North Sea and the English Channel.



These fearsome ships had two torpedo tubes with 4 torpedoes, a 40mm Bofors and 20mm cannon. However, their danger lay in their speed. They could travel at 43mph and at 50mph for short distances. We would have had very little warning if they descended upon us. They had caused such death and destruction among US service men, just three months earlier in - 'Night of the Bloody Tiger' - off Slapton Sands.

I think we had ventured further out than originally intended so it took time to get back into the safety of Dartmouth and alongside 'Westward Ho.' The following days we went on other tests where I was not involved but I had to be on board complete with tools. They found jobs for me to do including removing the di-pole aerial. I tried to get a sailor to do it for me but he smiled and refused - much to the amusement of those on the bridge. All in all, that trip to Dartmouth was quite eventful!

With my best wishes,

Geoffrey

Richmond 2019.

Captain Frank Slocum RN.

I am not presently aware of any books *specifically* about Slocum but Sir Brooks Richard's splendid two-volume work entitled 'Secret Flotillas' contains much about him and his extensive command. Slocum had been a Royal Naval Officer in World War 1 and in 1937 he was recruited from the RN Tactical School into SIS. In 1940, its Chief ('C') Stewart Menzies, appointed him to command the infant SIS 'private navy' - a clandestine boat service that ferried agents to and from occupied territory. Technically this was part of the Royal Naval Coastal Forces but Slocum operated independently - firstly with the tacit agreement of the Admiralty. However, in 1942 he was given more recognition outside of SIS - by being accorded the title of NID(C) attached to the Naval Intelligence Division. Then in June 1943 appointed its **Deputy Director of Operations Division (Irregular) (D.D.O.D.) (I)**.

Some of this undertaking was in conjunction with SOE but most of it for SIS in dangerous conditions and coastlines - without the modern tools we have in this digital age. Perhaps the MI6 (Section VIII) new telephone helped just a little - even if rather late in the day!

Although I have only limited knowledge of its work and even then only to Brittany - his command had covered 'pin points' (places for operations) along the North African coast, Corsica, the Adriatic, Yugoslavia, Albania, Italy and Norway. It was a large organisation but headed by a man well chosen for the task, dedicated to the care and protection of his men.