

SEA HEROES

Coastal Service in World War II



Lifeboat *Mary Stott* of Southwold (Photograph, Port of Lowestoft Research Society, PLRS 5223)

The 'Little Ships'

Between May and June 1940 Britain called for the urgent assistance of small vessels such as lifeboats, river steamers, tugs, yachts, launches and fishing boats. Their mission was to reach the beaches of Dunkirk in Normandy to rescue over 300,000 Allied troops who were cornered in a small pocket of land in Dunkirk by the invading German army. No large ships could approach the shallow beaches.

Local heroes

North Suffolk contributed many Little Ships to the Dunkirk flotilla. Three lifeboats, the *Michael Stephens* and *Agnes Cross* of Lowestoft, and the *Mary Stott* from Southwold, were called from their duties to help in the secret mission called "Operation Dynamo". About 50 Lowestoft trawlers also took part, as well as numerous longshore and river craft.

Coxswain Albert Spurgeon took the 46ft *Michael Stephens* to Dover and handed over command to the Royal Navy. In the darkness and chaos of Dunkirk harbour the *Michael Stephens* was twice rammed by motor torpedo boats as she ferried soldiers out to the big ships waiting in deep water. During these dangerous days the *Michael Stephens* rescued over 1500 men. Later, under Coxswain Spurgeon, it towed the badly holed lifeboat *Mary Stott* back to Southwold.

Not all vessels made it back. The drifters *Lord Cavan* (LT 680) and *Paxton* (LT 1112) were lost in the hostilities at Dunkirk. The *Lord Cavan* toiled for 10 days and 10 nights picking up soldiers from the beaches before it was sunk. James Mugridge, the skipper and Royal Navy Reservist, was awarded the DSC for his actions.

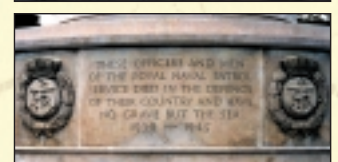
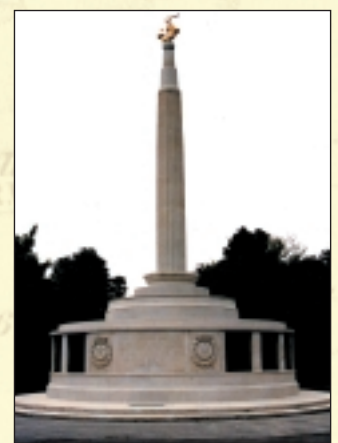


The drifter *Lord Cavan* (LT 680) — a Dunkirk victim (Photograph, Port of Lowestoft Research Society Collection, PLRS 9232)

The Royal Naval Patrol Service "Harry Tate's Navy"

His Majesty's auxiliary fleet was based at HMS *Europa*, Sparrow's Nest Lowestoft during WWII. It was also nick-named "Harry Tate's Navy" after a comedic music hall turn, a reflection on a fighting fleet that comprised hundreds of requisitioned trawlers, whalers, drifters, paddle-steamers and tugs, often equipped with out-of-date weaponry. The main operation from Lowestoft was mine-sweeping to keep the oceans clear for allied shipping. During this dangerous work the fleet lost more vessels than any other branch of the Royal Navy

After the war the Royal Naval Patrol Service memorial was erected by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission in Belle Vue Park, adjacent to Sparrow's Nest, and dedicated in 1953. Seventeen bronze panels bear the names of 2,385 service men who lost their lives between 1939 and 1945 "with no known grave other than the sea". A museum, dedicated to the story of the RNPS and open to the public, is located at Sparrow's Nest, Lowestoft. There is also a website www.harry-tates.org.uk where the individual stories of many servicemen can be read.



(Photographs by Marie Rose)