**The Navy**

**Secret operation**

As soon as I joined X-craft I learned that they had been designed and developed specifically for the job of attacking the German fleet in Norwegian fjords, and we had to be ready to do so within weeks. Just by sitting in Norwegian fjords the Germans were a constant threat to the Russian convoys, which kept many of our battleships in home waters. While we were training we couldn't tell any of our friends or family what we were doing or where we were doing it. So we just had to talk about walking, sailing or other recreational activities, without mentioning which part of the country or the world we were in. Those restrictions remained even when we were prisoners of war.

### The attack

The night before the attack we surfaced alongside a small island to rest and charge the batteries. Just before dawn we set off to the first challenge, the antisubmarine (a/s) net. This was the one the diver had to cut if the CO couldn't get through it in any other way (which all the COs was quite determined to find). As we approached the CO saw the gate in the a/s net had been opened to let a trawler through. We dived underneath its wake and got through without having to cut the net. Having got through the gate the CO, looking through the periscope, saw another boat was about to cross our path. We had to dive below periscope depth and whilst unsighted hit a bunch of anti-torpedo (a/t) nets moored in the fjord. In the reconnaissance photograph these nets were protecting a German battleship which had gone to sea.

The bow had caught on something we couldn't see and we couldn't move. All we could do was to shuffle the boat forward and astern, making it alternatively more and less buoyant, hoping to shake off the net. With no success after about 30 minutes the CO told me to get dressed and go and see what the problem was. Getting into a diving suit in an X-craft without assistance took a long time and was quite exhausting. Before I was ready to dive the CO said, 'Take it off. I don't know how it happened, but we're now free,' and we were on our way again.

The CO tried to find a way through the a/t nets protecting the Tirpitz. He tried one way after another and I don't think Godfrey Place (CO) was ever absolutely sure how but he suddenly found we were inside the nets surrounding theTirpitz. These were antitorpedo (a/t) nets with wire too heavy for the cutter to cut. These nets are usually laid in sections which overlap. Without knowing it, the CO may have slid over the top, found a gap or the open gate.

### Collision

A quick sighting through the periscope enabled the CO to order a course which took X7 straight to the Tirpitz - we actually banged into her - and were able to get underneath the after turret, where we dropped our first side cargo set to explode at an agreed time. We then 'crept' along the keel of the Tirpitz to the forward turret and dropped the other side cargo. The job done, the CO set a course for home! But we didn't get very far because we hit the a/t nets again. The CO decided to try and get underneath the a/t nets.

'Crawling' along the bottom a cable caught X7 across the bow and once again we were unable to move. We were all very apprehensive because we began to hear explosions. We thought some were depth charges - smaller ones may have been hand grenades but there was one much louder than the others. We looked at each other, thinking, 'Is that ours?' If it was we felt it should have been much louder and we would have been severely damaged. It blew the wire off our bow and we got under way once again, but the boat was uncontrollable.

Because the boat went to the bottom or the surface, the CO decided to abandon ship. There was no possibility of getting out of the fjord to rejoin our towing submarine. Each time we surfaced, bullets rattled on the casing but none penetrated the pressure hull. Fortunately we were too close to the Tirpitz to enable her heavy armament to fire at us. The CO opened the W&D hatch, waving a rather dirty white sweater to indicate surrender. The small arms fire stopped but as the CO climbed onto the casing he realised we were about to hit a moored target and with the hatch open the boat, with little buoyancy, would be flooded. He turned round to shut the hatch, which I was trying to push open from below and quite a bit of water came in before the hatch was closed. It was enough to sink the boat, which plunged to the bottom.

### A successful operation

Operation Source was a major operation during the war because it was directed at the major German battleships, it involved a great number of people. Six midget submarines had to be designed, built, manned and developed from scratch and six large submarines had to be taken off normal patrols. The focus naturally falls on the survivors, but we must remember that the survivors represent a much larger body of men who were all essential to the attack on Tirpitz.

As we anchored in the bay of Naples at 22:00 captain Belben received a signal ordering him to prepare for sea immediately and return to Anzio to take the place of HMS Dido, which had been in collision with a landing craft in Naples bay. The position at Anzio was so critical not one cruiser could be spared, as every gun was needed to drive back the enemy who was driving our land forces dangerously towards the sea. In fact Mr Winston Churchill our leader and prime minister stated, 'A deep dangerous wedge was driving into our line and no further retreat was possible, it was life or death.'

Crewmen in the duty port watch toiled late into the night to oil and ammunition under the hazard of air alerts. At 06:00 on 18th February, a Friday, we left Naples bay and increased speed to 26 knots and then steered a NW course to make for Anzio, zigzagging as she went to avoid possible submarine attacks. Early that morning U410 commanded by Lieutenant Arno Fensky, aged 25, had moved into the area. He had already destroyed a 7,000-ton supply ship on the 15th February.

At 06:53 the U410 look-out cried out 'enemy ship', the captain of U410 ordered diving stations to periscope level and closed in fast on HMS Penelope. At 06:58 a torpedo leapt from its tube to run at a depth of 6 meters towards an unsuspecting Penelope, it took just 35 seconds to reach the cruiser. Then there was a thunderous explosion, which sent men crashing to the deck, as the stern lifted out of the water.

The hit was well below the water line on the starboard side abaft the engine room. It fractured oil tanks and caused flooding to the aft engine room and other compartments. An emergency signal was immediately started, but before the full text was tapped out the power failed. Penelope listed to starboard as the sea rushed through the torn hull, then she began circling to starboard, her steering gear damaged, in effect no lights, aft engine room out of action, no steering, no telephones and 9 degree list to starboard.

The captain ordered counter flooding, then ordered a signalman to signal to LST 165 and 430 a few miles distant to 'close me', they were returning to Naples empty to pick up more troops, by then Penelope had stopped with smoke belching from her after funnel. At that point Fensky ordered 'Fire 2' tube No 1 with a Mark V torpedo. To give the cruiser the coup de grace then came the second shattering explosion which hit starboard side abreast the boiler room followed by a second thud which caused the after magazine to blow up. Penelope capsized with a column of water that shot into the air, smoke belching from the after funnel and the boiler room exploded and flooded. Penelope had broken her back, two ends pointed upwards, the bow at an angle of 50 degrees.

My action station had just been fallen out and I instinctively made my way into the open portside waist, and no sooner reached the open as the explosion occurred. I immediately dived over the side into the icy, rough, oil-covered sea wearing a roll neck pullover, jacket and sea boots. Other men still in duffel coats sank straight to the bottom. The ship had vanished in one and a half minutes with a large number of men trapped inside, no boats or rafts as they went with the ship. Many men died in the water from lack of strength and oil ingestion. After approx one and three-quarters hours a tank landing craft reached us, but alas had no means of picking us up.

Our heroic chaplain Rev PA Murphy had shortly gone into the sick bay stating, in reply to a question, 'I'm going where I'm needed.' Unfortunately he was not seen again.

Some army ratings hung rope over the side of the LST and those of us that had the strength grabbed the rope and were pulled onto the deck of the LST. As this was difficult being soaked in oil, many men slipped back into the sea and were not seen again. My strength was quickly ebbing but I managed to hang onto the rope and as I neared the top two men of the Queen's Own Regiment grabbed my shoulders and pulled me on board where I flopped like an oily whale. We were taken back to Naples and put aboard a hospital ship Winchester Castle for a few days to recover.

The total lost were 418 from a ship's company of 650, including the captain DG Belben DSCAM. We were then dispersed to Malta and eventually dispersed to our own units.