

THE LOSS OF H.M.S SQUIRREL

Alan Ferguson SQUIRREL read with some interest the account
Of the loss of both VESTAL and SQUIRREL in the Summer Sweeper

The force of British East Indies Fleet under the command of Vice-Admiral H.T.C. Walker, that left Trincolmalee, consisted of the Aircraft Carriers Ameer and Empress, H.M.S. Nelson, H.M.S. Sussex together with four destroyers and five Algerines – PLUCKY, RIFLEMAN, VESTAL, SQUIRREL and PINCHER, plus two Dan Layers.

In the afternoon of the 24th of July 1945 sweeping began, but initially few mines were found. However shortly, PLUCKY in the lead, caught a mine in her sweep, which blew up, she promptly turned away into a swept area, SQUIRREL did not appear to follow and then struck a mine which destroyed the bow of the ship. As I recall, six members of the Ship's Company were killed in the explosion, one died later and was buried at sea off H.M.S. Nelson. Most survivors were transferred to the Nelson, but I with several others were put aboard H.M.S. Sussex. It was from her, that we had a grand view of the events that were described by Peter Connold VESTAL, that resulted in the loss of his ship.

At the time SQUIRREL struck the mine, a press photographer must have been in the one of the following ships and managed to take a snap. I later managed to obtain a copy from the P.A.

Frank Owen SQUIRREL refers to Peter Connold's VESTAL story as an excellent one describing fully the events on that fateful day.

I would like to thank, on behalf of myself and I am sure, other SQUIRREL survivors for the rapid response of VESTAL in rendering assistance. I was the rating in imminent danger of a messy end in the ship's propeller. In my inflated lifebelt, I was helpless against the pull of the screw. My life was saved by P.O. James Armstrong SQUIRREL. I caught the tip of the blade of the extended carley paddle. There are nights when I still wake in a cold sweat!

I thank again the VESTAL members for inviting SQUIRREL survivors to the wreath laying on the Cross at Banbury on the 50th anniversary of the sinking, a memorable occasion! Greetings to the 7th Flotilla.

Reference: Loss of H.M.S. VESTAL Summer Sweeper No.60 Page 23.

Whoops, Dear Harold, sad to say,
Only Peter's ship's list, caused dismay,
T'was not CHAMELEON in that affray,
But, H.M.S. Pincher – 294 – J

Sid Holburn PINCHER goes on to tell us.

We will never forget that "Operation Livery" with all those men killed and terribly wounded. Two Ship's lost. Then in a matter of weeks – the atom bombs were dropped on Japan. The war was over by September.

ODE TO AN ALGERINE

Algerine, they were all they say,
The elite of sweepers in their day,
Britain had a navy then,
But something happened to it, since then.

Battleships, Cruisers, all have gone,
Somehow, somebody got it wrong.
Once the Algerines led the way,
That was some 50 odds years, from this day.

“D” Day, Sicily, Anzio, North Africa and Atlantic,
All said these little ships were just fantastic,
They served in every fleet and theatre.
To make the sea lanes, that much clearer.

At the end of the war, still things to do,
Algerines stand by, for sweeping off Corfu,
All sorts of jobs still to be done,
No time for sweepers, to have fun.

Thank you Canada for sending us 62 of these,
To serve the fleets on all the seas,
Without your help, what would have done,
Our children to-day, would not, be having fun.

100 men and a thousand tons,
A 4” High Mounting and twin Oerlikon guns,
The Algerines of years gone by,
Will never be forgotten, by the men who say AYE.

Contributed by Ron Stoneham WELFARE

THE LOSS OF H.M.S. VESTAL, THE 7TH M.S.F.

Peter Connold VESTAL gives an eye-witness account of the sinking of H.M.S. VESTAL by a Japanese Kamikaze aircraft on 26th July 1945.

We arrived off the Isle of Phuket on the south west coast Siam at 0730 Monday 23rd July 1945. We commenced sweeping a clearance sweep at 0830. This was to detect any mines that might be there, near an area where we knew some were. By noon it was completed and we started to sweep the area “B”, where mines were known to be. Each ‘leg’ was ten miles, and we swept the rest of the day, with no success. The ‘legs’ were marked of by dan-buoys.

PLUCKY, SQUIRREL, VESTAL, RIFLEMAN and CHAMELEON made up the flotilla. Punjab and Deccan laid dan-buoys.

We steamed from this area, out to sea – to wait for the next day. H.M.S. Nelson slowly patrolled up and down. Two aircraft carriers, six destroyers and the cruiser Sussex. Next morning came, the Isle of Phuket could be seen dimly on the horizon and many other isles. We started to sweep, all forenoon was unsuccessful. The latter part of

the afternoon we cut two mines; then, on our way back mines bobbed up everywhere; we had a job to avoid them as they floated past, having been cut adrift by the ships ahead.

At 1810, the PLUCKY'S sweep blew up, at once she went off into swept waters, the SQUIRREL did the same – but too late. She was struck at 1815 by a mine under her four-inch gun mounting. She stopped in a cloud of smoke and debris, she shuddered and settled in the water the bow going down fast. Within five minutes her upper deck was at an angle of 35 degrees and her screws were thrashing the air. She lowered boats, men jumped over the side, one man screamed loud and in terrible fear as he was drawn almost under the port screw. The whaler passing at the time put out an oar for him to grab and he was saved. The hissing of steam, shouts of command, the bubbling of escaping air, men swimming around, floats and boats drifting away, bits of wood boxes, a boat mast, spare oars, splintered bits of deck, all drifting away.

The VESTAL, being the nearest ship, was first to send assistance. Within five minutes I was alongside with the motor boat. Men begrimed by the smoke of the explosion, men doped by the shock, stared out of white, wide-open eyes. The wounded were evacuated into the boat; some were in a bad state. Smashed legs, broken ribs, fractured skulls, all bloody and moaning were lowered into the boat by willing hands. The Captain shouted down; "Have you got all the wounded?" My reply was; "I hope so, Sir, there's no more on the ship, but plenty in the water."

The SQUIRREL by then had settled down at an angle of 40 degrees, the screws stopped and nobody on board. She looked sad, neglected, abandoned and she was to be left behind. No enemy shell to sink her, no enemy bomb, but the shells of a British destroyer, H.M.S. Rotherham.

En route to the VESTAL, we took in tow a whaler carrying fifty-odd ratings, a few were wounded. One chap, a young doctor, had both arms and legs broken, ribs smashed in, and his face a terrible spectacle. I brought back motor boat and whaler carrying sixty-four ratings. They were hoisted aboard, a list was made out to ascertain the ones lost. The wounded were cared for, rum was issued out, sweeping for the day was suspended. The Nelson signalled 'Send all survivors to me.' In the fading light of the sun we went alongside the Nelson, despatched our precious cargo, men, more valuable cargo not to be found.

Next day, sweeping was resumed. Many mines were cut up and exploded. The area was swept. "A clean sweep" was signalled to our superiors.

Tuesday 26th dawned. Sweeping commenced with renewed vigour, close in shore: the enemy could be seen, but dare not give away the position of their batteries that they so jealously guard by poor camouflage. The Nelson was the reason; she had them covered, and would have blasted the first sign of resistance to hell. Radar aerials were clearly visible, small ack ack guns too; many little out-posts, machine guns nests had been spotted by our keen-eyed lookout.

Up and down this new area we went, all hands on deck except those on watch in the boiler room and engine room. For the ship is battened down, no washing, all meals brought up top. Those not engaged in working the sweeps stood and watched, and in their minds weighed their chances of survival if the ship was hit.

At 1817 the Sussex opened fire on shore installations with her 8 inch guns. At 1825 she ceased fire. Aircraft approached from over the hills – three unidentified planes. As they flew nearer it was plain to see. All at once hell was let loose. Every ship opened

fire with anti-aircraft guns – it was bedlam. The leading plane was steering a straight course from the others towards the Sussex, her under-carriage down. Nearer and nearer she came, all fire on the Sussex was concentrated on her, and at last – not ten yards from her starboard side – she blew up in a mass of yellow flame and smoke. What was left ricocheted against the starboard quarter, then dropped into the water.

In the meantime more aircraft flew overhead, one more singled out the Sussex and flew straight for her, to try and crash itself into the ship. During those few seconds of flight approaching her victim, one plane dropping out of the smoke spotted sky. Once again all ack ack guns of the cruiser concentrated on this plane coming in at her. She's hit, a puff of smoke, a brilliant flame, then it went out, the plane banked over, missed the ship and continued on making a large arc. At first its course seemed to go in the direction of PLUCKY. Would it dive on her? No, she'll miss that one. On it came to a distance of 2,000 yards to our port, it flattened out, and with our hearts in our mouths, we saw she was going to crash on us. With grim fanatical determination it came, all yellow and green, a brand new plane. Undercarriage down, and the pilot's head just above the fuselage. Our guns blazed, the 4 inch let out a shattering bang. But on the plane came. Will she hit us? Yes, of all the ships there, we were the target, on it came, nearer and nearer and then BOOM!!!!

Thunder smoke, splinters, rumbling, a sharp hissing steam, the smashing down of large pieces of plate. More smoke, somebody shouting, yes, somebody shouting quite near; what's he say – "Get me out of this bloody place." Somebody trapped there. I ran to a chap, pulled him out of the debris. He was covered in the blackness of the blast, blood oozed out from many wounds, his head, arms, chest and legs were peppered with splinters. Into the gun shelter I dragged him, rendering what first aid I could; great splinters of wood I was pulling out of him, large splinters, and there I left the chap, lying on a pouch mat.

I became aware of what was happening outside; guns still blazed, men shouted, stretchers were carried past. The steam still hissing, wounded men, in the water shouting to be helped in the boats. With flames and choking smoke, I dashed to lower a boat, as I did, I saw the engine and boiler room casualties brought past, some burnt out of all recognition. The boat was half down, the stern of it dropped, the foremast fell was cut, but too late – it sank.

A smoke screen was laid around us, but planes still buzzed overhead, boats came alongside and took off the wounded. The Punjab slid along our starboard side like a Thames fire boat, all her hoses pouring water into the hull of a once proud little ship. With fire fighting and getting ready to take the ship in tow, we had noticed a dangerous list that was slowly taking control of her. By this time, the steam had stopped hissing, there was no more to hiss, only the crackle as the hungry enemy ate out the interior of this plucky vessel.

The aircraft had gone, guns were only smoking, our screen laid around us had blown away; all seemed quiet, but the devastation and destruction was terrible. The loss of life, sixteen, as near as we could reckon. The wounded, many more. The order was sent across by D11; "Abandon your ship – we will sink her by gun fire." We jumped into the Punjab, I was second to last leaving. The Captain followed. We pushed off and left that smouldering hulk, that only 75 minutes before was a smart Fleet Sweeper, teeming with life and laughing, happy faces. The once pride of the flotilla.

As we glided away slowly through the gentle swell, she seemed to look after us, sadly as a dog left behind by its master when he has gone to work. She was a lady, trying to stand up straight, trying to make her last minutes above water proud, to give us a last good impression of her, before she was committed to the depths of the dark blue sea. She had put up a good fight for her honour. She had served her country in three short years of life. She had done well. These were the thoughts that ran through our weary minds, this was how we remember her – plucky, faithful and proud. The first rounds of the Rotherham struck her magazines and she blew up, and went down in a boiling flaming mass of fuel oil. The last we saw, was a glow on the distant horizon.

At 2300 we embarked onto Nelson. We were greeted well by the ship's company, and survivors of the SQUIRREL who were searching for the various chaps who had been good to them, when they had suffered in a similar way.

Supper was ready, a hot shower, clothes to wear, fags to smoke. Then we trooped to the sick bay to hear the worst. Two had died, they were to be buried at 0100. Some were being operated on, others cared for by willing hands.

We went on deck to the service and watched the two small bundles of two young lads, both nineteen years, laid by the opening in the guard rail, two white ensigns covered them. The service was short and fitting for the occasion. "In silence of the night we came to pay tribute to our fallen comrades." These were the commencing words. They were dropped into the black shining sea to be swallowed up by its depth – from our sight – but not from our minds.

We went to sleep, or tried, but there was no sleep for us that night nor the next. Planes attacked next day, but were shot down. After that it was peaceful until we arrived at Trincolmalee.....

The operation cost twenty-seven lives, two ships, and many wounded. Another are had been swept clear of mines, another job completed.