

# SEMAPHORE

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## HMAS QUIBERON, 1942 – TEAMWORK IN ACTION

*The focus at sea is on the effort of the entire crew to place the combat instrument which is the ship into the control of the directing mind which is the commander.<sup>1</sup>*

Semaphore Issue 8 of May 2007 described HMAS *Quiberon*'s night action against an escorted Italian military convoy on 1-2 December 1942. Acting in concert with the remainder of Force 'Q', the Australian destroyer had initiated the Allied interdiction campaign, which would eventually paralyse Axis shipping in the Sicilian Channel and isolate the enemy's ground forces in Tunisia. Force 'Q' was commanded by Rear Admiral C.H.J. Harcourt, RN, and at the end of the highly successful engagement he ordered his three cruisers and two destroyers back to their base at Bone in Algeria.

*Quiberon*'s captain, Commander Hugh Browning, RN, had ample cause to be pleased with the latest efforts of his ship's company. Following her commissioning on 6 July 1942 the destroyer had steamed more than 17,000 miles and spent many long weeks on convoy escort duty. But until her attachment to Force 'Q' on 25 November, *Quiberon* had seen little actual action. Thereafter, however, the intensity of activity increased rapidly and the exceptional quality of the ship's individual and collective training became manifest. Since arriving at Bone on 27 November, *Quiberon* had destroyed an enemy submarine, fought a victorious night surface action, and been subject to heavy bombing raids on four out of five days. With recent combat experience enhancing confidence in their own fighting abilities and those of their consorts, there can be no doubt that *Quiberon*'s ship's company had attained the highest degree of battle readiness.

Such expertise was essential, for the enemy was certainly not cowed. In late 1942 the Italians and Germans still retained powerful air forces in the Mediterranean theatre and Allied merchantmen and warships at sea faced the constant threat of sudden air attack. Such attacks usually came in waves, and for those on the receiving end were likened to the attentions of '...fiends from hell let loose'.<sup>2</sup> Force 'Q's successful sortie had not gone unnoticed and the enemy's air response began before dawn on 2 December. At 0636 one of twelve German He.111 twin-engined bombers despatched from Sardinia attacked from the port side of the line of fast-steaming ships and torpedoed the destroyer HMS *Quentin*.

*Quentin* was left dead in the water but remained afloat, and *Quiberon* circled her once to ascertain her status. More enemy aircraft were approaching and, informed that *Quentin* could not steam, Browning endeavoured to carry out Admiral Harcourt's verbal instructions to 'cut our losses'.<sup>3</sup> He therefore proceeded alongside and ordered her to abandon ship. *Quiberon* remained stopped for 8-10 minutes as 182 of *Quentin*'s officers and ratings scrambled between the two decks. The approaching

aircraft were Sardinian-based Ju-88 dive-bombers and their cannon and bomb attacks continued during this remarkable feat of seamanship. No serious damage was done, but realising that he could risk no further delay Browning ordered full astern just as another pair of Ju-88s began their attacks. The bombs fell where *Quiberon*'s forecastle had been and exploded harmlessly under her bow. Although only twelve of *Quentin*'s ship's company were lost, Browning's great regret was that he did not have time to bring off the few men who had foolishly attempted to retrieve their belongings. Once clear of *Quentin*, Browning rang down for full ahead and *Quiberon* worked swiftly up to 33 knots.



*HMAS Quiberon at speed. She had a wartime complement of 220 officers and ratings*

Browning had hoped to remain to make sure of sinking *Quentin*, but by this time the enemy pilots had realised that his main 4.7-inch guns were incapable of high-angle fire. Having only to face *Quiberon*'s four-barrelled 2-pounder pom-pom and six single 20-mm Oerlikons, the airmen became progressively bolder. Moreover, with more than 400 men now onboard, Browning appreciated that he had little choice but to return immediately to Bone. In any case, it seemed likely that the enemy would seek to finish off the helpless *Quentin*. This they proceeded to do, effectively halving the attention devoted to *Quiberon*.

The Australian destroyer nevertheless faced another seven determined air assaults as she steamed south-west at maximum speed. The hostile aircraft continued to approach in twos or threes with Ju-88s from *Luftwaffe* squadrons based in Sicily carrying out the later attacks. Normally one aircraft would endeavour to draw *Quiberon*'s fire when on the limit of the destroyer's effective range and then another would dive down hoping to catch the guns with empty ammunition pans. Familiar with these tactics the gun's crews were not caught out. Time and again their accurate fire convinced the attackers to turn away at the last minute and either jettison their weapons or go around again for another attempt. At least two aircraft were hit, but none observed to crash. Browning was a man of steady nerves and managed to evade those bombs that were aimed at *Quiberon* by waiting until the



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moment of release and then executing a quick turn. Only a few sticks fell close and none caused damage.

*Quiberon's* high speed dash ended at 0915 when she arrived at Bone, weary but virtually unscathed. Securing alongside the cruiser HMS *Sirius*, she transferred the *Quentin* survivors. Later that day Force 'Q' sailed for Algiers, where they arrived on 3 December. While his ship replenished and those men who could be spared rested, Browning began drafting his post-action narrative. He was acutely aware that his ship had survived only because his entire ship's company had worked together as a team. So impressed was he at their cool performance in the heat of action that he recommended fourteen men for decorations. This was a relatively high proportion of his complement, but as Vice Admiral Creswell had once remarked: 'the greatest lack in any "head" is failure to obtain just recognition of the services of those under him'.<sup>4</sup>



*A 2-pdr Mk VIII pom-pom in action. These weapons were hand elevated and trained, and the controlled rate of fire was 96-98 rounds per minute*

In submitting his recommendations for awards, Browning remarked that they were not in order of merit. The list began by naming three key officers.<sup>5</sup> First was the Gunnery Officer, Lieutenant Lindsay MacLiver, RAN, whose 'zeal and enthusiasm', Browning wrote, was entirely responsible for *Quiberon's* ability to give such a good account of herself during the night and day actions. Next was the Gunnery Control Officer, Lieutenant Anthony Synnot, RAN,<sup>6</sup> responsible for the accurate and rapid fire that had severely damaged a destroyer, sunk a merchant ship and kept enemy aircraft at a reasonable distance. Last mentioned was Lieutenant Commander (E) Frederick Hodgson, RAN, whose 'magnificent work' included providing 33 knots at three minutes notice in a ship overdue for boiler cleaning and docking.

Browning then moved on to *Quiberon's* seamen. The Gunner's Mate, Petty Officer Noel Porter, who was responsible for the training and efficiency of the gun's crews, received high praise for his own 'efficiency and zeal', with the proof of this evident during the actions. The captains of 'Y' and 'B' guns, Petty Officers Leonard Ryder and Douglas Thorpe, were both commended for never missing a salvo either in the day or night actions. Likewise the captain of the pom-pom, and the gunners of the three starboard Oerlikons all received special mention. They were each credited with beating off the attacks of waves of aircraft and therefore being in some measure responsible for *Quiberon's* safe arrival. Recalling the extensive use of his Type 285 radar set during the night action, Browning also added to his list the R.D.F. (Radio

Direction Finding) operator, Able Seaman Neville Overson, whose continuous and accurate ranges meant that he was largely responsible for the quick hitting of the destroyer engaged by HMAS *Quiberon*.

Finally, Browning singled-out three members of *Quiberon's* engineering branch. Chief Engine Room Artificer William Johnson was the senior engine room rating, and it was due to his 'energy and example' that the speeds called for had been achieved under trying conditions during the bombing attacks. Then came Stoker Petty Officer Charles Erickson, in charge of steaming No. 1 Boiler Room, who had kept the boiler steaming steadily, despite the rapid movements from 'Full Ahead' to 'Full Astern'. These orders had caused severe fluctuations in water level, and had Erickson not appreciated the danger to both boiler and ship, and acted promptly on his own initiative, it is likely that *Quiberon* would have been hit while steaming at slow speed. Also praised in this context was 23-year-old Stoker Cecil Dumbrell who was firing No. 1 Boiler. *Quiberon* was his first ship, but it was largely due to the speed and coolness with which he manipulated sprayers that the boiler was steamed so smoothly.



*RAN engineers on watch. Temperatures in the engine spaces of a steam-driven warship could typically reach more than 50 °C*

Browning's attribution of responsibility for his ship's success across all ranks and branches remains instructive. People generate the Navy's capabilities, and it is only through crew cohesion, mutual trust and support that a fighting ship can sustain battle readiness. *Quiberon's* ship's company epitomised all the qualities needed to create a team spirit which, sustained by professional mastery and leadership, will never accept defeat. In the final account Force 'Q' received 68 awards for the combined action, of which nine went to the men of *Quiberon*.<sup>7</sup> Historically the best-trained and led sailors have invariably won the war at sea. The maritime war of the future is unlikely to be significantly different.

<sup>1</sup> Royal Australian Navy, *Australian Maritime Doctrine*, Canberra, 2000, p. 77.  
<sup>2</sup> B. Whiting, *Ship of Courage*, Allen & Unwin, 1994, p. 16.  
<sup>3</sup> 'Narrative of attack on Convoy on the night of Tuesday-Wednesday 1st & 2nd Dec.', 3 December 1942, HMAS *Quiberon* file, SPC-A.  
<sup>4</sup> Thring Papers (SPC-A): letter, Creswell to Thring, 22 February 1920.  
<sup>5</sup> All details from 'Narrative of attack on Convoy on night of Tuesday-Wednesday 1st & 2nd Dec.', 3 Dec 1942, HMAS *Quiberon* file, SPC-A.  
<sup>6</sup> Later Admiral Sir Anthony Synnot, Chief of Defence Force Staff.  
<sup>7</sup> DSC - MacLiver; DSM - Porter, Erickson; MiD - Browning, Hodgson, Johnson, Ryder, Thorpe, Dumbrell. *Supplement to London Gazette*, 6 April 1943.

