

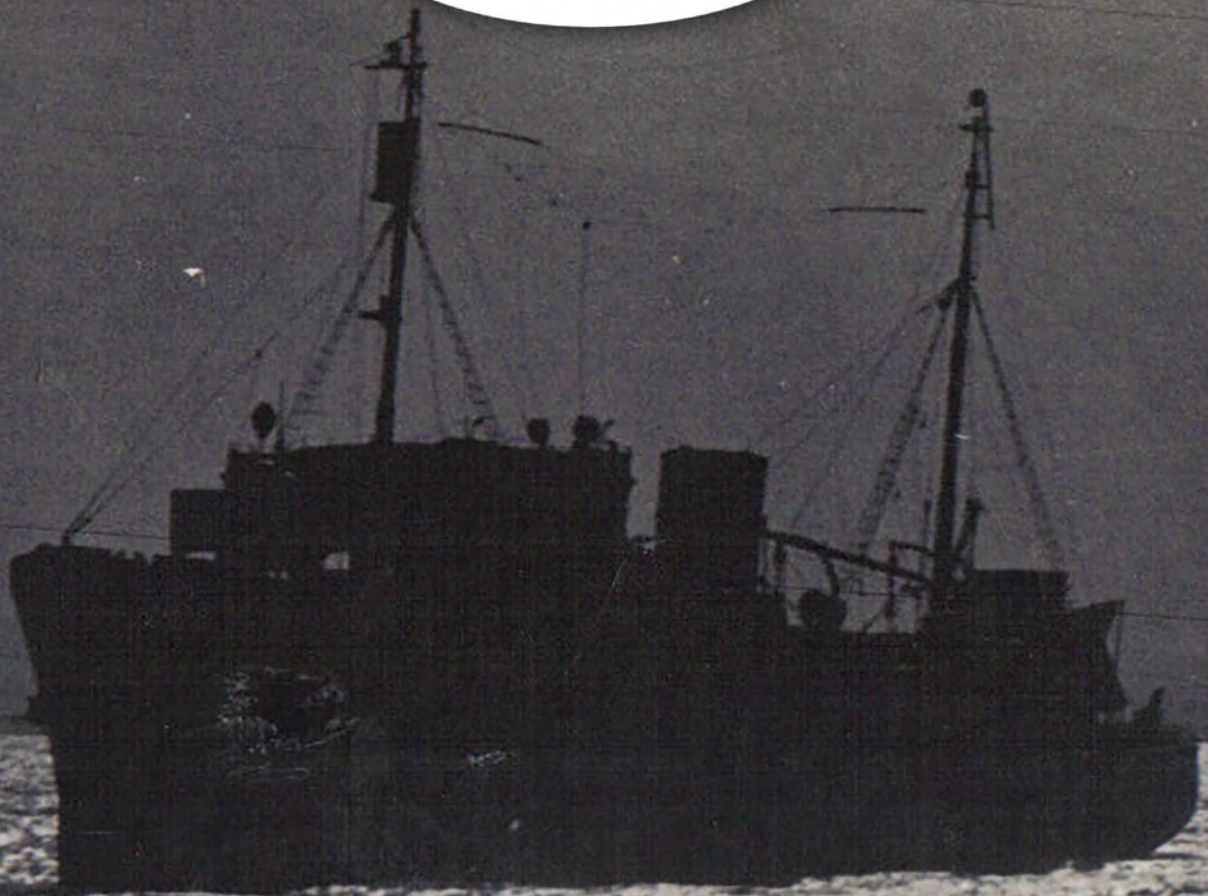
VITAL TO Britain's war effort was the delivery of coal from collieries in the north of England to every point around the British Isles, although with road and rail infrastructure inadequate and unable to cope with distribution from the pits to where the fuel was needed the only way was by sea. Indeed, delivery to all ports north, east, south and west had long been conducted by colliers that relentlessly plied established coastal routes. The outbreak of war, however, suddenly placed these little ships at risk of attack from sea and from the air, and by the time the Battle of Britain had got underway in July 1940 the risk to shipping in the English Channel was considerable. >>

MAIN PICTURE:
HMS *Borealis*
silhouetted
against the
dusk sky with
her balloon
close-hauled.
(ALL IMAGES
1940 MEDIA LTD)

'BALLOONS UP!'

Protecting coastal convoys from air attack during 1940 was vital. Here, **Andy Saunders** tells the story of a failed defensive measure: towed barrage balloons.

'BALLOONS UP!'



'BALLOONS UP!'

HMS Borealis

BELOW: Hotchkiss anti-aircraft guns like this one were mounted on the wheelhouse of HMS *Borealis* although none of the crew had any idea how to operate them.



MIDDLE RIGHT: Loading up a 250 kg bomb onto a Stukageschwader 77 aircraft. The two crew members supervise the operation.

BELOW: Lt Arthur Hague.

Now, the Germans had fast E-Boats operating from French ports and Luftwaffe attack aircraft having all parts of the Channel within range. Somehow, the ships carrying coal and other vital goods still needed to get through and in order to give some measure of protection they were organised into Royal Navy escorted convoys. By day, they were also given air cover by the RAF. Designated either CE (Channel Eastbound) or CW (Channel Westbound), the convoys were

numbered consecutively and given an individual codename by the RAF. Additionally, and in order to protect the merchantmen from dive-bombing attack, an idea was conceived to form a waterborne barrage balloon force to simply tow balloons along with the merchant ships and form

a protective curtain around the convoy. The thinking was that if balloons could be stationed around the processions of ships it would be impossible for dive bombers to attack, or for low flying enemy aircraft in level flight to approach the vessels for bombing and strafing. That, at least, was the theory and as early as 17 April 1940 plans for the establishment of waterborne balloon units were in hand, with a signal from the Air Ministry to the Admiralty setting out initial arrangements for twelve units to be set up.

INCREASING CHANNEL ATTACKS

First, it was necessary to assemble and convert suitable ships for the task and although it did not take the Admiralty very long to select a number of potentially usable vessels it took rather longer to put plans into effect. Initially, the craft were assembled at Grimsby but it took another three months to move plans forward. Among the craft earmarked were a variety of tugs, including French vessels, a railway steamer and Belgian pilot cutters. The French and Belgian ships had come across to Britain to assist with the Dunkirk evacuations and had ended up



impressed into Admiralty service. Quite likely, it was the Luftwaffe's increasing Channel attacks during July that accelerated arrangements to bring waterborne barrage balloons into service. Among the motley selection of converted vessels were His Majesty's Ships *Rene De Besnerais*, *Gatinais*, *Elan II*, *Pingouin*, *Astral*, *Mamouth*, *Fratton*, *Pintade*, *Sioux* and *Borealis*. The *Borealis* was the command of Lt Arthur Hague RN, who fondly recalled the little ship that would be his command for just four days: 'She had been an Antwerp pilot vessel, and was a beautiful little diesel-engine craft of 451 tons, built in 1930. When I first became acquainted with her at the very end of July she was being converted



FAR LEFT: To counter the threat of air attack against coastal convoys a flotilla of small vessel towing barrage balloons was established during the summer of 1940. Here, a balloon is readied for sea on one of the Mobile Balloon Barrage ships.

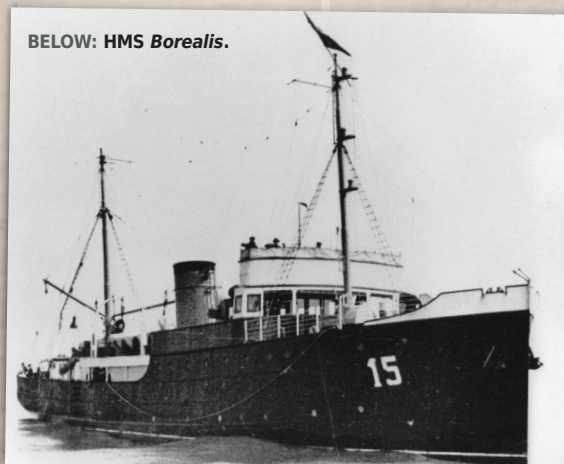
for her barrage balloon duties at Portsmouth where she was being fitted with the balloon winch and towing gear with its protective wire cage. Her sister ship, another Antwerp pilot ship, was *Astral*. Mounted above the bridge were two Hotchkiss machine guns for anti-aircraft defence, although I should add that none of us had any idea at all how to use them! Of the crew, sixteen sailors from the Royal Navy Patrol Service made up the ships complement although, in addition, we had three RAF airmen to handle the balloons. Oh...and I shouldn't forget 'Malo' the ship's dog. 'Malo' was already on board when we all joined, and was a flea-ridden black and white terrier of indeterminate parentage. He had joined the ship with escaping British troops at Malo-les-Bains, a suburb of Dunkirk (hence 'Malo'), and had stayed on board ever since. This, then, was HMS *Borealis*."

MOBILE BALLOON BARRAGE

Waterborne barrage balloons were first employed in an eastbound Channel convoy (CE8) that sailed from Falmouth on 31 July and Arthur Hague sailed from Portsmouth with the Barrage Balloon Flotilla (officially the Mobile Balloon Barrage) to join the convoy on Sunday 4 August. That morning, the cavalcade of converted ships set out down Southampton Water to pick up the convoy off the Isle of Wight and thus provide the first waterborne barrage balloon cover for a Channel convoy, heading eastwards through the most dangerous part of the passage. In the lead was the flotilla commander (Senior Officer Mobile Balloon Barrage - SOMBB) Lt.Cdr. G H F Owles, sailing in HMS *Astral* which was the other converted Antwerp pilot ship. Lt Cdr Owles's men had gleefully pointed out that his sobriquet SOMBB

was an anagram of bombs, although doubtless they would be less inclined to find that so amusing before very long. The other ships of the Mobile Balloon Barrage that day were HMS *Elan II*, *Rene Le Besnerais*, *Pingouin*, *Sioux* and *Gatinais*. Heading on eastwards, that day the convoy encountered no untoward incidents although Hague and his crew were able to get the feel of their new ship without having to contend with interference from the enemy. It was vitally important, too, for the RAF balloon handlers on board to get used to their new operating procedures and strange new environment. Whilst all of them were experienced balloon crews, flying a balloon from a ship instead of flying it tethered to a fixed spot on land was something entirely different. There had, of course, been no adequate training and this was going to be very much a case of finding out how it >>

BELOW: The calm before the storm. Looking back down the convoy column from the deck of HMS *Borealis* during the late afternoon of 7 August 1940. The Commodore's ship, the SS *Empire Crusader*, is immediately astern. As a precautionary measure, one of the lifeboats on *Borealis* has been swung out on its davits.



BELOW: HMS *Borealis*.



'BALLOONS UP!'

HMS Borealis



CORPORAL WILLIAM WILL

Of the *Borealis* crew, Arthur Hague and two of his men would be recognised for their meritorious service that day and were Mentioned in Dispatches. In addition to Hague, Second Hand Cyril White and Engineman Joseph Dell Taylor (Both of the Royal Naval Patrol Service) were also rewarded with MID's. Additionally, the RAF's Corporal William Will

was awarded the BEM for his service at sea with the RAF water-borne barrage balloon units. His 1941 citation stated: 'This airman has been continuously employed as a barrage balloon operator on the Channel convoy from Sheerness to Southampton and return. He has made fourteen return trips during which there has been considerable activity by shelling from the French coast, dive bombing and E-Boat attacks. When balloons have been destroyed he has helped the naval ratings with the operation of the various guns and assisted in every possible way in a co-operative effort between the RAF and Royal Navy.'



ABOVE: Cpl William Will, RAF, was in charge of the balloon on HMS *Borealis*. He is photographed here with his bride, Phyllis, who was a WAAF balloon operator.

BELOW THREE:

On 8 August 1940 Messerschmitt 109s attacked and shot down all of the barrage balloons being flown above Convoy CW9 PEEWIT, clearing the way for an attack by Junkers 87 Stuka dive-bombers. Filled with hydrogen, the volatile balloons were easily ignited by gunfire from the German fighters and fell, flaming, into the sea. On the right a Channel convoy comes under attack, 1940.

worked while on-the-job. Challenging when some of the airmen had not even been to sea before, let alone flown a barrage balloon from a moving ship!

CONVOY PEEWIT

The marine barrage balloon unit of the RAF was a Flight of 952 (Barrage Balloon) Squadron, commanded by Sqn Ldr R H Berryman and a component of No.1 Balloon Centre at RAF Kidbrooke. 952 Squadron though was based at Sheerness, Kent. Here, a total of forty balloons were held, thirty-two of them allocated as 'waterborne', although of that thirty-two there would very shortly be significantly fewer on the unit's inventory. Sheerness, not far from the mouth of the Thames, was an advantageous location for 952 Squadron's balloons, being situated conveniently close to the beginning and end point of the CW and CE convoys

respectively; Southend-on-Sea. It was to Sheerness, then, that *Borealis* headed on 5 August after completing the CE8 escort and to ready herself for the next assignment, two days later, with CW9. Convoy Westbound Number 9 was also given the RAF codename PEEWIT, thus becoming CW9 PEEWIT.

Early on the morning of 7 August *Borealis* and the rest of her flotilla slipped out of Sheerness and set sail down the Thames Estuary on the morning tide to meet the assembling convoy off North Foreland. Bobbing and nodding above the decks sat the squat silver balloons, close-hauled and secure, straining at their cables to be free. Around them, the RAF crews were busy with final preparations; checking and re-checking cables and ropes, checking the envelopes of the balloons and topping-up with hydrogen from the long cylinders stowed on the aft-deck. Despite the east-bound passage completed just over twenty four hours earlier many of the airmen were still struggling to find their sea legs and trying to cope with queasiness brought on by sea-sickness and nervous apprehension.

'BALLOONS UP!'

On board the Barrage Balloon Flotilla Commanders ship, *Astral*, sailed the Convoy Balloon Officer, Flt Lt A M Puckle, and as the small vessels finally joined the convoy of twenty-five coasters and nine Royal Navy escort ships by the Nore Light Vessel at around 09.00 Puckle gave the order 'Balloon's up!' With *Borealis* at the head of the port column, and leading the Convoy Commodore's ship *SS Empire Crusader*, with *Astral* sailing at the head of the starboard column and the other balloon vessels spread out down the flank and to the rear, the collection of six balloons rose in unison as the convoy took on its shape. On board *Borealis* Cpl William Will supervised his balloon crew, LAC Wardley and AC Warnes, their winch clattering as it paid out nearly three thousand feet of steel cable. The cable whistled and whined off its drum until the tethered silver monsters were at their operational convoy ceiling. At just below three thousand feet Cpl Will ordered "Stop winch!" and the cable drum was locked. The same procedure, repeated on board the other balloon vessels, gave



ABOVE: A formation of Junkers 87 Stuka aircraft head towards their objective.

"They dived through broken cloud directly above the convoy and at 12.20 a single bomb scored a direct hit on *Borealis*."



a curtain of taught steel cable at strategic positions around the ships. 'That'll stop those bloody Stukas' commented the master of one of the merchant vessels in convoy, the SS Rye, to his First Officer as he eyed the barrage silently rise into position around them. Having been on the receiving end of recent Junkers 87 Stuka attacks, this to him seemed to be the answer. As the balloons rode above the ships, slightly head-down, the effect on the passage of the towing vessels could clearly be felt and as *Borealis* rode the crest of each successive wave the pull of the balloon was discernible as she descended rather more gently into the trough of the wave than would otherwise be the case. The additional drag caused by the monsters on these small ships also required careful adjustment of engine speed to compensate and maintain station. There was rather more to this operation than simply towing a balloon; the behaviour of the balloon having a direct impact upon the sailing of the ship and vice-versa.

the Luftwaffe were leaving them alone because of the balloons. After all, it had been the same story on the previous CE convoy. Then, as the convoy neared the narrower parts of the Dover Straits, Puckle ordered his balloons down and secured. It was a pre-arranged plan. The idea being that the visibility of the convoy would be increased from the French coast if the balloons could be seen above the white cliffs. No doubt some of the convoy crews felt concerned to see their reassuring new form of protection taken away just as they sailed into what was the most dangerous part of the passage. Wasn't this where attack by Stuka was usually most likely? However, the visibility was limited and on board *Astral* Flt Lt Puckle discussed the tactic with Lt Cdr Owles. After all, if the Germans had seen the balloons on the previous convoy (CE8) they had probably decided that aerial attack was no longer an option. There was reason enough to suppose that was exactly why they hadn't been attacked. And if they had seen the balloons



TOP RIGHT: Hptm Waldemar Plewig of Stab.II/StG77 was one of the pilots who took part in the late afternoon dive-bombing attack against shipping associated with CW9 PEEWIT. He was, however, shot down south of the Isle of Wight and taken POW. His gunner, Fw Kurt Schauer, was missing.

RIGHT: Hit by a single 50 kg bomb, the devastation caused on board *Borealis* is clearly evident in a series of remarkable pictures taken shortly after the attack, which includes the wrecked wheelhouse with its smashed glass and dislodged switchgear.



STUKA ALLEY

Rounding North Foreland, the procession of ships was now very much into 'Stuka Alley' but there was a notable absence of any aerial activity save for circling RAF fighters on Convoy Patrol and no hint of any Luftwaffe interference. Already, confidence was growing among the balloon crews and those on board the merchant vessels that

flying above CW9 earlier in the day they may have ruled out an air attack. Not only that, but even if the Germans had realised the balloons were down through the Straits it would have simply been impossible for them to organise an air attack quickly enough to hit the convoy there. By the time they could organise any attack the balloons would be raised again, anyway. >>

'BALLOONS UP!'

HMS Borealis



RIGHT:
A tin-hatted Lt Hague steadies himself among the debris having just lashed a replacement White Ensign to the stern.

BELOW:
The carnage wrought among the merchant ships of Convoy CW9 PEEWIT in the English Channel by E-Boat and Stuka attack on 7/8 August 1940 was considerable. Typical of the scenes in the Channel that day, a Spitfire circles a sinking British coaster with its stern blown off.

All in all, this barrage balloon idea seemed a resounding success. So far.

TERRIFYING ORDEAL

With the balloons raised past Folkestone, and with the convoy rounding Dungeness towards the setting sun, it may well have been that the balloons themselves rather than the convoy's smoke attracted the enemy's attention from Wissant. Either way, the six black blobs riding clearly and proudly 3,000ft above the background of Dungeness provided a perfect silhouette against the bright evening sky as they were viewed through powerful German binoculars – just the form of 'advertisement' that Flt Lt

Puckle had tried to avoid above the white cliffs of Dover. Now, they had helped give the game away, if not being entirely responsible for announcing the convoy's presence. Now, the enemy laid his plans; a night-time attack by E-Boat followed by daylight air assaults. The trap was set.

As dusk fell so did the balloons which settled above their respective decks for the night and were made fast. On board Borealis Cpl Will and his men carried out routine checks and completed daily maintenance chores. Thus far on CW9, and previously on CE8, the balloon crews had been lulled into a false sense of security but were unwittingly sailing straight into a terrifying ordeal of many hours duration. Very soon the airmen might well regret the sense of adventure that had led them to volunteer for the slightly more exciting and interesting-sounding Seaborne Barrage Balloon Unit.

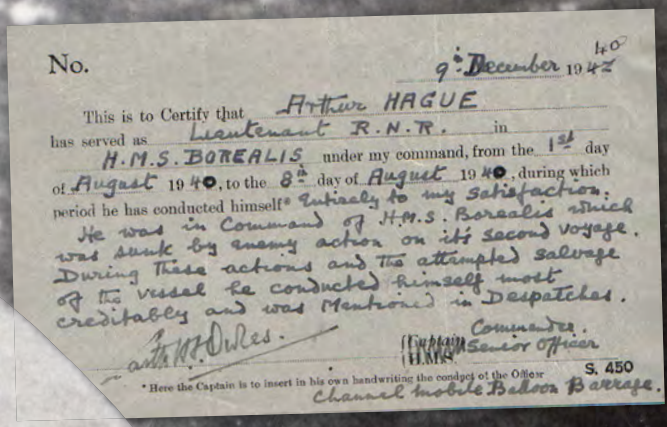
THE FIRST TORPEDOS HIT

By 02.00 hours the convoy was just off Beachy Head. Arthur Hague takes up the story:

'Some time in the middle watch I became aware of the powerful throb of engines and at first assumed this to come from enemy bombers crossing the Channel on a night raid. Suddenly, a loud explosion lit up the sky and I saw that the coaster immediately astern of Borealis had fallen out of line and was listing. Instantly, I realised that the throbbing noise

came from E-Boats which must have been lying in wait to launch a torpedo attack from the inshore side of our convoy.'

When the convoy had sailed into the E-Boat ambush during the early hours of 8 August Borealis was at the very head of the port column and, as such, she was in one of the most dangerous places of all. As the first torpedoes hit, and the sky was lit up by gunfire and flares, Arthur Hague ordered 'Hard to port!' and watched as the head of his ship swung oh-so-slowly around. His plan was simply to minimise the profile Borealis presented to the attackers who were clearly approaching from the beam, but as the ship swung around Hague watched astonished as the wake





ABOVE: During the late afternoon attack this Junkers 87 Stuka of 4/StG77 was shot down by Plt Off Peter 'Polly' Parrott in a Hurricane of 145 Squadron. It crash landed at St Lawrence on the Isle of Wight, its pilot POW and its gunner dead.



of a torpedo sped past from under his starboard counter and vanished off to port. Had he maintained his original course then there was no doubting the torpedo would have struck them squarely amidships. An explosion from the barrage balloon and its stored cylinders of hydrogen, along with the ship's fuel oil, would have most likely blown Hague's little ship out of the water. Luck, for the moment at least, was on their side.

'THE CONVOY MUST RE-FORM'

For a while, things were relatively uneventful. The convoy tried to sort itself out and re-form once the E-Boats had broken off their engagement, with the barrage raised in the early morning just as the first rays of sun through broken cloud glinted off the silver-grey bulk of the balloons. Meanwhile, *Empire Crusader* attempted to marshal the remaining ships back into some semblance of order. Overnight, some had simply vanished. Others were trailing too far behind to be able to make enough headway to catch up, and at least one had limped into another port although the *SS Holme Force*, *SS Fife Coast* and *SS Ouse* had all been sunk. Ironically, the *Ouse* had gone down just off Newhaven close-by the estuary of

the river after which she was named. Despite the mayhem, however, the Commodore was emphatic; the convoy must reform into its established pattern and the surviving ships take up their designated stations. With journey's end almost in sight the worst was surely over. Or so they thought. For other ships, the ordeal was only just beginning.

UNWITTING DECOYS

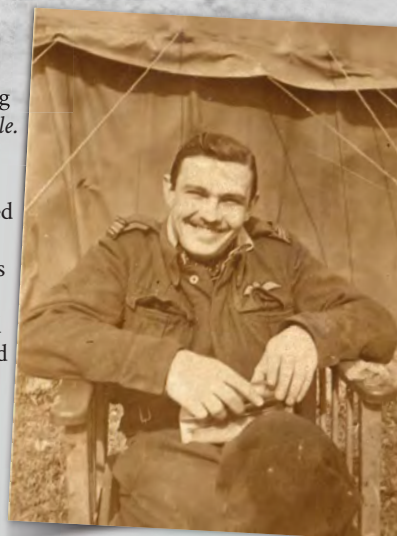
The E-Boat attack during the night had slowed the convoy to such an extent that it was now some way behind its time schedule and, as result, another six vessels that had sailed out from The Solent to join the expected convoy could see no sign of it when they rounded the eastern end of the island. Unfortunately for them, however, a Dornier 17 had earlier sighted the main convoy off Selsey Bill at 06.20 hours and a force of Junkers 87 Stuka dive-bombers despatched to deal with the battered remnants of CW9. Instead of finding the convoy, however, the Ju 87s spotted the six ships who were themselves looking for CW9. Unwittingly, the potential 'joiners'

now became decoys for the convoy and the Stukas pounced mercilessly, sinking the *SS Ajax* and *SS Coquetdale*. The returning attack force, though, could only report that some ships had survived but a number of others had been seen in the vicinity. As a result, another attack was planned with the assembled might of the Stukas of I. and III./St.G.2 being ordered to finish the job.

DIRECT HIT

Forty-nine dive-bombers from the two units were loaded up with no less than two hundred and forty five high-explosive bombs. Taking-off around 11.45 hrs, Ventnor Chain Home Radar Station picked up the trace of a large enemy formation, at least one hundred strong with their fighter escort, about twenty miles north of Cherbourg and headed on a course directly towards CW9. By now, the convoy was between St Catherine's Point and The Needles

Having survived the ordeal of the E-Boat attack, Lt. Hague was sailing at the head of the port column with *HMS Astral* off to starboard. On board *Astral*, Flt Lt Puckle ordered down his balloon to engage in seaborne inflation trials when, at 12.19 exactly, Hague spotted enemy aircraft diving down on them. Suddenly, the Me 109's of 9/JG 27 shot up Hague's balloon (just below a bank of cloud at 4,000ft) which immediately erupted in flames and descended to the sea. Around them, the other four balloons fell, wretched >>

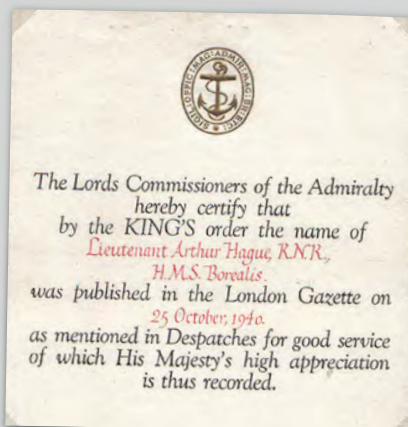


ABOVE: Plt Off Peter Parrott pictured later in the war.

MIDDLE LEFT: 'Malo' the dog gets a bath from Arthur Hague's wife after his Channel rescue.

MIDDLE RIGHT: The Scotty Dog emblem of I/St.G 2, one of the units that took part in the attack on Convoy CW9 PEEWIT.

LEFT: Arthur Hague's Mention in Despatches Certificate, awarded after the episode.



'BALLOONS UP!'

HMS Borealis

BOTTOM: During a dive on the site in 2011 the damaged hydrogen bottles remained on the deck of HMS Borealis.

TOP LEFT (OPPOSITE PAGE): One of the portholes from HMS Borealis, its glass broken by bomb splinters or bullets.

BELOW RIGHT: Many pilots expressed a great fear of barrage balloons, especially at night, as colliding with tethering cables was a real risk. This threat could make things considerably more difficult for pilots.

BELOW: The Captain's tea cup? A Royal Navy marked broken China teacup found in the wreckage of the wheel-house on HMS Borealis.

in flame and black smoke and as the charred remains fell hissing into the water the Ju 87's of Stuka Geschwader 2 followed them down and commenced an attack. They dived through broken cloud directly above the convoy and at 12.20 a single bomb scored a direct hit on Borealis.

HAVOC ON THE BRIDGE

The 50kg bomb struck the foremast, bringing it down over the starboard side of the bridge, before piercing about half way between the bridge and stem and finally exploding below decks. Here, the blast blew a hole in the starboard bow just on the waterline causing an in-rush of water, flooding the forward compartment. The explosion caused havoc on the bridge and totally destroyed the gun positions on top of the wheelhouse. Of the chart table, charts and convoy orders there was no trace and the principal steering position had been demolished along with the improvised concrete protection around the wheelhouse itself. On the bridge, all electrical switching gear was destroyed and every window broken along with the portholes in the ship's hull which were holed by bullets or splinters. Behind the wheelhouse, the gravity diesel feed had ruptured and fuel oil spewed out on a deck liberally strewn with assorted debris; wood, glass, metal splinters, bits of smouldering balloon fabric and wrecked equipment.

Incredibly, there were only six casualties and only three were serious. That there were not

more injuries or any fatalities was nothing short of unbelievable. Still intact on the after deck were the big hydrogen cylinders with not a mark or scratch on them, although all else was peppered with holes. Trailing behind Borealis for over 3,000ft was the now impotent balloon cable, dragging on the sea bed like an anchor before Cpl Will managed to chop it free. In a moment, Arthur Hague's tidy little ship had been reduced to a wreck and he noticed that the ensign mast had been carried away by the falling balloon cable. This would never do, and with the attack still in progress he went off to the flag locker to get another White Ensign. Finding what he wanted, Hague scrambled over the mass of debris and lashed the replacement to the after rigging. After all, naval tradition had to be upheld come what may. As she fell out of line, Borealis was at least still afloat. Meanwhile, the dive-bombers had also hit and sunk the SS Empire Crusader and damaged the SS Tres,

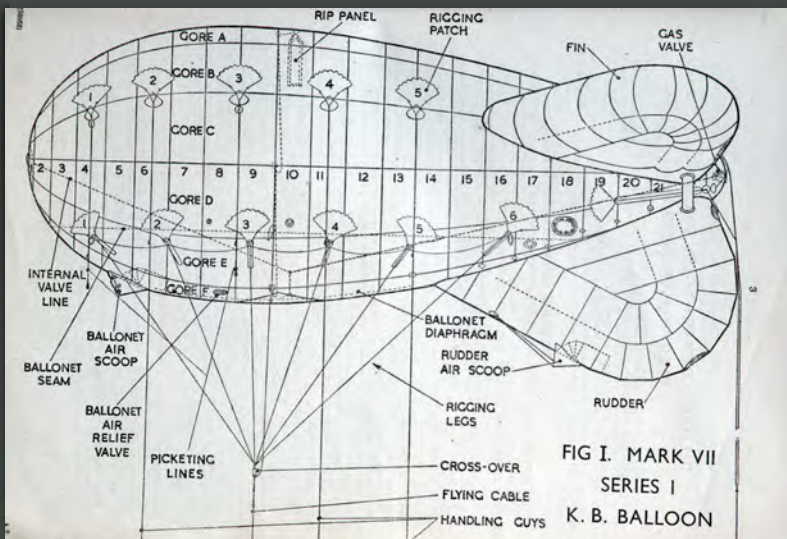
SS Patersonian and SS John M. It was mayhem.

ABANDON SHIP

After the attack, Hague's little ship limped bravely on with the intention of reaching port. No longer effective, and barely afloat, Hague was determined to save her if he possibly could. Unfortunately, the Luftwaffe had other ideas. Hague takes up the story from the point when he had stopped his engine and fallen out of line after Borealis had been hit:

"With my chief engine man I inspected the collision bulkhead which was holding well and then put the ship into hand steering from aft – the bridge steering gear being no longer effective. The Chief Engine man, J D Taylor, with great difficulty had caulked the fuel supply tank sufficiently to keep the main engine supplied and it was found that the ship would still work.

At this time HMS Astral came to my assistance and ordered HMS





ABOVE: Protector and protector re-united. Arthur Hague (left) meets Peter Parrott at Tangmere Military Aviation Museum.

Elan II to take me in tow and for me to send all hands not required to work the ship over to HMS *Astral*. I had already transferred my three serious casualties to HMS *Greenfly* and I retained my two officers and seven ratings.

HMS *Elan II* took me in tow with three hawsers stern first because of the pressure on the collision bulkhead. It was found impossible to steer *Borealis*, however, so *Elan II* cast off and came alongside with her bow to my stern and was secured. Owing to the rising westerly wind and sea this method was also found to be impracticable and likely to cause too much damage to *Elan II*. In the meantime, HMS *Renee* had arrived to stand by and an attempt made to tow *Borealis* stern first by *Elan II* while *Renee* made fast forwards and steered her. This method proved highly satisfactory and the three vessels proceeded towards Portsmouth. At about 17.00 [*sic. In fact, nearer 16.15 hrs.*] a further enemy dive bomber attack was made, and with the ship unmanageable and it being impossible to make any effective defence, I abandoned her with my remaining hands in the only boat that was left and lay off until the bombers had been driven off by our fighters. We then pulled back to the ship with the intention of securing her again as bomb splinters had severed the

tow ropes. Unfortunately, we found her listing heavily to port apparently having suffered a further direct hit or near miss which had started her bulkhead. There was a sound of escaping gas which suggested that the hydrogen bottles on her after deck had been hit. I therefore considered it unwise to board the vessel again and we were picked up by the *Renee*.'

WHITE ENSIGN PROUDLY FLYING

To say that they were 'safely aboard' might be overstating the case given the ongoing attentions of the Luftwaffe, but as they stood on the deck of *Renee* the crew of *Borealis*, and their little dog 'Malo', watched as a list to port steadily worsened and she gradually sank lower into the water. Finally, the end came at about 17.20 and she slid beneath the waves, bow first, at a position fifteen miles south-east of The Needles and 5.5 miles south of St Catherine's Point, precisely at: 50° 29.050' north, 001° 42.166' west. As she went, the White Ensign lashed up by Hague still flew proudly from the rigging. Suddenly, as *Borealis* slipped under the water, the master of *Renee* bellowed loudly from the bridge to one of his crew: 'Sailor! Take off your hat, man. Show a mark of respect for one of His Majesty's ships.' Corporal Will, erstwhile NCO

in charge of *Borealis's* balloon, truthfully admitted he was less concerned about His Majesty's Ship than he was about his uniform tunic that was still on board. In its breast pocket sat thirty shillings and a wrist watch. Will reasoned that His Majesty certainly had plenty more ships. He, meanwhile, had only thirty shillings and one watch!

The passage of Convoy CW9 PEEWIT down the English Channel on 8 August 1940 had shown conclusively that there could be no reliance on barrage balloons for protection from air attack against coastal shipping like this. Despite losses to balloons and ships, however, the scheme continued for some months to come. It also continued to be an entirely futile exercise. ©

TOP: Map showing the passage of Convoy CW9 PEEWIT on 7/8 August 1940.