

MTB219 a 70ft (21.33m) long WWII Motor Torpedo Boat, built by Vosper & Co, Portchester, Portsmouth, who saw service in the Royal Navy's Light Coastal Forces between 1941 and 1945.



In Service, 1941



January 2015

A Short Service History

September 1941 MTB219 was put into service at HMS Wasp, Dover where she joined the 6th MTB Flotilla under the command of Temporary Sub Lt Paul Alured Berthon, DSC, RNVR (Royal Navy Volunteer Reservist). As Coastal Forces was operated by volunteer reservists (the Navy's "Territorials") and allied crews, they were mostly only given 'temporary' command statuses, to last for the duration of the war.

On the 27th and 28th November 1941 219 and the 6th Flotilla she was sent into battle against the German merchant cruiser "Komet", off Boulogne and Dunkirk as it returned to Germany. Komet escaped with minor damage, but 219 destroyed one of E-boat escorts which was last seen with three R boats standing by to rescue the crew. Sadly the Coxswain of MTB 219 was shot in the kidneys, and later died of his wounds.

In February 1942, (now under the command of TS/Lt. Mark Arnold Forster) MTB 219 was one of a pack of seven Motor Torpedo Boats (MTBs 219, 221, 45, 44, 48, 41 and 43) sent in to attack the German battle cruisers: Scharnhorst, Gneisenau and Prinz Eugen as they dashed through the English

Channel to avoid the RAF bombing of Brest - Prinz Eugen and the Bismarck had sank HMS Hood the previous May (1941).

Seven 70ft wooden boats were sent out to attack three 771ft (over 10 times bigger), faster, heavily armoured battle ships, which were protected by three destroyers, eighteen E-boats and the might of the Luftwaffe - who were "close enough to see the metal rim of the pilots' goggles."

219 managed to get within 4,000 yards and fire her torpedoes, but to no avail. MTB 219 and 45 rescued a handful of Fairey Swordfish aircrew, who had been shot down. Others weren't so lucky; of the eighteen young men of the Fleet Air Arm who flew the wood and fabric bombers, only five survived the battle.

Although the attack failed and the battle cruisers managed to get through, none of them were ever able to return to attack allied shipping in the Atlantic again. Prinz Eugen was torpedoed a couple of days later, Gneisenau was damaged "beyond repair" in an air raid on the 27th February and Scharnhorst was destroyed in the Battle of North Cape on 26 December 1943.

On the 13th May 1942 the armed raider Stier 23 was passing through the Dover Straits enroute from Rotterdam to Boulogne. She was escorted by the Kondor, Falke, Iltis and Seeadler and 16 R Boats (or eight M Class minesweepers four E Boats and 6 R Boats according to UK sources). In the early hours, after being engaged by British Coastal gun batteries, they were attacked by MTBs 219, 220 and 221 and a couple of MGBs. MTB 219 torpedoes and sinks the Iltis; MTB220 hits the Seeadler, but not enough to stop her, and she promptly rams into MTB 220. "Battered beyond recognition" 220 also sinks and her Senior Officer (Lt EAE Cornish) and most of her crew are killed. MTB 221 then sinks the Seeadler. MGB 9 is also severely damaged and never again operational.

Further distinguished battles continued during World War II and MTB219 and her crews operated with distinction and were frequently "mentioned in dispatches", with Lt Mark Arnold Forster being awarded the DSO and the DSC. However, at the end of the war MTB 219 and the 1700 other surviving craft of the Coastal Forces were unceremoniously abandoned, scrapped or scuttled by the Navy. MTB219 was lucky, as she was rescued by the Staines Sea Scouts and then later used as a houseboat on the River Thames.

After WWII Lt Mark Arnold Forster went back to his career as a writer and journalist, and went on to write the landmark TV series "The World at War" for Thames Television - still being shown regularly on "Yesterday".

Design & Build

MTB219 was designed and built by Peter DuCane's Vosper & Company and launched on the 3rd July 1941. She was originally under construction for the Greek navy but, at the declaration of hostilities, her contract was taken over by the Royal Navy.

Vosper's became famous for their pioneering hard chine hull designs for fast attack craft. This improved the overall performance of the vessels, as the hard chine and curves of the bows were

designed to eliminate unwanted bow spray at low speed; allowing them to 'cut through' the water more efficiently.

219's flatter bottom and transom from mid-ships to stern also allows her to plane (with her nose out of the water) again improving speed and creating a more stable fighting/gun platform. She features a 'scaloped' deck to aid torpedo launching.

The hull structure was of 'double diagonal' Honduras mahogany, with a waterproofing layer of calico or Irish linen and white lead paste, fixed with bronze screws and copper rivets. This allowed her to avoid magnetic mines and made her quick and simple to build and also incredibly light - her engine mounts and floors bearers were all made of plywood over mahogany with an aluminium cap for the engines to sit on to avoid wood shattering (stabiliser).

As these materials are not all available to the modern boat builder, Militaryboats has restored her using the same 'double diagonal' method with copper rivets and bronze screws, but using stapeley (African mahogany) planks and a waterproofing layer of Ceconite (aircraft fabric) and epoxy resin.