

-WHO WAS "THAT" WOMAN-

by CMO MM Jack W. Read, CG43 Resflo 1

Several weeks ago the question was asked of a London newspaper, after a reader had vacationed in the channel coast town of Poole, Dorset. The town Quay, so peaceful and quiet today, was much different some 55 years ago when preparations were being made for the D-Day Invasion of Normandy. At one end of the Quay, adjacent to the Royal Life Saving Service building, is a large block of stone with a bronze plaque attached. This plaque was dedicated, on the 50th Anniversary of Normandy Landings, to the memory of U.S. Coast Guard Rescue Flotilla 1, whose 60 wooden cutters, 83 feet in length, that sailed from Poole as part of the vast Naval armada that made history on 6 June, 1944. The sole mission of this "Matchbox Fleet" was to rescue those thrown into the cold waters of the English Channel, during the invasion period. This was a true "life-saving" mission in the midst of war! As part of the inscription on the plaque, mention is made of some 1438 men and 1 woman, rescued during the period of channel hostilities. And so the question was born, "Who was "That" Woman?"

The passing of time has made it difficult to get a correct answer now. Cutter crewmen have passed away, memories of those still with us are not as clear as in past days, and records have been lost. However, with the diligence of a few Flotilla men and help from the U.S. Archives, this is what we know---

On the morning of August 7, 1944, off the Normandy coast, CG31, (83428) Commanded by Lt(jg) Burke Powers, was under orders from the HMS Dispatch to proceed NE to an area from which an explosion had been heard and felt. A thick fog blanketed the area as the cutter moved slowly through it. Suddenly, the fog was swept away, "as if by the Hand of God," said one of the crew, and hundreds of people appeared in the waters before them. A hospital ship, SS AMSTERDAM, had hit a mine as it proceeded to join up with a cross-channel convoy to return wounded to the UK. The ship was severely damaged and sank within 11 minutes, thus the numbers in the water. The cutter crew began to pick up the people as the boat moved slowly amongst them. Two crewmen, M0MM2c George Betz, and S1c Max Seamon, tossed over pneumatic rafts, going overboard with them to help the severely wounded, until they could be taken aboard the 31 Boat. These two men stayed in the water to do their job until all were rescued, some 90 minutes later. CG 31 took aboard 99 casualties, *Burke Powers* one of which was a woman. SC1c Peter Mattogno was helping survivors up the side, on a net that acted as a ladder, and found that he had a woman on board. After a few minutes rest, this lady who turned out to be a British nurse, began to help in the rescue by working on sedating the severely wounded brought aboard, ignoring her own plight. With the cutter full, it returned to the HMS Dispatch and transferred the survivors to the larger ship. Later the 31 Boat took some of the rescued to the Duke of Lancaster, a hospital ship anchored off Courselles. The survivors, including 15 German prisoners and ~~one~~ nurse, were landed at Southampton that evening.


Since time was precious during the rescue mission, especially so due to the many severely wounded, the cutter crew took no names, etc. so they never knew the identity of "their nurse." Suffice it to say, they were extremely proud to have had a part in her rescue and did greatly admire her pluck and devotion to duty, while a victim of the sinking of her ship. CG31 and it's crew did the mission assigned in an exemplary manner, as the records indicate. It was just one of the many stories behind the Plague on Poole Quay. Almost 1500 men and the 1 woman can be eternally grateful for the U.S. Coast Guard Rescue Flotilla 1, during those dark days of WW2.

Since we do not know the name, we cannot truly answer the question posed by the reader of the newspaper. Perhaps it will be sufficient to say, "That Woman" was a devoted British nurse who, ignoring her own adversity, did her job in the highest traditions of the R.A.M.C. --Above and Beyond--Maybe, after all the years have passed, that is enough for us to know.

PS: SS AMSTERDAM British Hospital Ship 4220 GT
Complement 102 Crew 60 R.A.M.C. staff 258 Patients
Survivors 70 Crew 50 R.A.M.C. Staff 203 Patients

AMSTERDAM struck mine at 0504 GCT, 7 Aug 44 in 29.25N-00.34W,
sank at approx. 0515 GCT





CG-83428