

## *Gordon Charles Steele VC 1894-1981*

At eleven o'clock in the morning of the eleventh day of the eleventh month of 1918, an Armistice came into force in Europe, silencing the guns which had caused such slaughter during four years of war, and ending the danger and misery of the soldiers who occupied opposing trenches.

But the war was not over for everyone, and not all the armed forces of Germany were brought to heel. A bloody revolution was taking place in Russia that threatened the stability of the nations that had so recently been at war with one another.

There were areas around Russia's borders that were in a state of utter confusion and none more so than in the countries bordering the Baltic Sea. The many states here were divided – or linked – by ethnic origins, religion, national fervour and alliances, many of which changed on an almost daily basis. In addition, the Bolshevik threat from Russia itself threatened to engulf many of the smaller countries.

It was because of this threat that the German army and a small navy were allowed, within limits, to continue their presence. So, in the Baltic Sea there was a very powerful Russian naval presence, a much smaller German naval force – and a British Fleet.

It was into this hopelessly confused situation that Rear Admiral Walter Cowan arrived in 1919, despatched to the area by a government which had no clear policy for the area and seemed undecided about who was friend and who was foe.

It was an impossible situation for any commander who, in addition to his other responsibilities had been told to give all possible assistance to two British Coastal Motor Boats being operated in secret in the area by a British naval officer, on behalf of the British Secret Service.

One of the few policies clear to Cowan was that the British government was supporting anti-Bolshevik Russians against the Communist revolutionaries. So, when Bolshevik Russian ships began shelling a 'White' Russian stronghold, Cowan sanctioned a covert operation against them by the two small Coastal Motor Boats carrying out secret missions under the command of Lieutenant Agar RN.

In the event only one of the motor boats succeeded in entering the heavily fortified island harbour at Kronstadt, where the Communist Russian fleet were based, but it torpedoed and sank a 6,700 ton cruiser, under the very noses of the Bolshevik authorities.

It was an audacious raid that won a Victoria Cross for Lieutenant Agar. It also gave Admiral Cowan an idea of how he might deal with two Russian battleships based at Kronstadt, which were able to pound White Russian positions at will and also posed a serious threat to his fleet should they choose to emerge and attack him.

Kronstadt was protected by a number of heavily armed forts forming a chain between the island where the Russian harbour was situated and the mainland. There were also extensive minefields and underwater breakwaters. Without charts of the minefields and the breakwaters, only vessels of very shallow draught could attempt to enter the harbour — as Agar had done.

In view of this, Cowan arranged for a number of Coastal Motor Boats to be sent out from England, his intention being to use them to mount a daring raid on the capital ships hiding in the Kronstadt naval base.

Eight Coastal Motor Boats, of a type slightly larger than those used by Agar, were towed out from their base near Clacton, in Essex. Unfortunately, bad weather sank one boat, and the tow ropes of the others were constantly breaking, but seven CMBs reached Cowan's base in the Finnish port of Biorco at the end of July. Their commanding officer was Commander Claude Congreve Dobson. In the days following his arrival, Dobson carried out a number of reconnaissance flights over Kronstadt to check out the harbour for himself and ascertain where the two Bolshevik battleships were berthed.

It was decided that the depot ship *Pamyat Azova* should be targeted at the same time, in order to curtail the activities of Bolshevik submarines, which had already successfully attacked Cowan's fleet. There were



also at least three cruisers inside the harbour and, immediately outside the entrance, a Bolshevik destroyer was stationed to act as a guard ship.

An attack by the tiny three-man Coastal Motor Boats against such formidable opposition appeared to be foolhardy, but by the middle of August, the plans had been drawn up and everything was ready for the audacious raid —everything except the weather. However, the weather proved to be perfect on Sunday, 17th August 1919 and the raid was arranged at short notice for that night.

On board each CMB, the crew was comprised of a commanding officer who would be at the wheel, a second officer responsible for firing the torpedoes, and a mechanic to tend the vessels twin engines. The boats also carried a local smuggler to act as a pilot should the need arise — a precaution which proved a wise one.

Lieutenant Agar VC, had been called in to guide the boats to Kronstadt between the forts but during the night run three of the boats lost touch with him, including the boat of Commander Dobson, whose smuggler passenger took him on a different route before he was able to rejoin his other boats, just off the Bolshevik held island.

Along the way some of the forts opened fire on the boats, but they appeared to be unaware of the significance of so many motor vessels and Kronstadt was not warned of their approach.

The CMBs formed up into two groups, the first led by Lieutenant Bremner, who carried apparatus to deal with a boom, should there be one across the harbour entrance. There was not and as aircraft of the Royal Air Force arrived to create a diversion, Bremner went straight in and attacked the submarine depot ship. His torpedoes struck home and the depot ship sank almost immediately.

Commander Dobson was next and in order to fire his torpedoes needed to manoeuvre his boat by stopping one engine in order to make a very tight turn, but his torpedoes also found their target, the battle-cruiser *Petrapavlovsk*, which began to settle in the waters of the harbour. Unfortunately, the sound of the explosions brought out the garrison, who had been sheltering from the bombs dropped by the RAF.

As the third boat, captained by Lieutenant Dayrell-Reed entered the harbour it was fired upon from all sides but continued to head towards the berths of the large warships.

Suddenly, the second officer on board, Lieutenant Gordon Steele, realised that the CMB was heading straight for a hospital ship. He called to warn Dayrell-Reed, but saw him slumped over the wheel. He had been shot in the head.

Jumping to the wheel, Steele lowered the commanding officer into the cockpit, at the same time spinning the wheel to put the boat back on its proper course. They were now very close to the battleship, *Andrei Pervosvanni* and Steele manoeuvred the boat into position before firing his two torpedoes at very close range.

Steele's attack too was successful and he was so close to his target that water and powder from the explosion of the torpedoes was deposited upon the small British vessel before it headed at full speed for the harbour entrance under heavy fire and caught in the light of searchlights, which were promptly attacked by the RAF aircraft.

By now the defences in Kronstadt and on the nearby forts were thoroughly aroused and the CMB detailed to deal with the Bolshevik guardship was itself sunk by a shell from the destroyer.

Next, two of the CMBs collided in the entrance to the harbour, one almost being cut in two. By putting on full speed, the commanding officer of the surviving CMB was able to leave the harbour, carrying the more seriously damaged vessel with it until the crew were rescued. Unfortunately, the surviving boat was then sunk by the Russian guardship

Another of the CMBs broke down but was towed clear of Kronstadt and brought to safety.

Lieutenant Dayrell-Reed lived long enough to be congratulated by Admiral Cowan on the success of the mission, but died soon afterwards.

Three of the seven Coastal Motor Boats had been lost and a number of officers either killed or wounded. In addition, three officers and six ratings had been captured, but as a result of the operation a battleship, a battle-cruiser and a submarine depot ship had been sunk. The raid had been an outstanding success and the Bolshevik navy no longer posed a serious threat to Admiral Cowan's fleet.

Two Victoria Crosses were awarded as a result of this audacious raid. One went to Commander Dobson for

his leadership, skill and bravery in commanding the operation. The second went to Lieutenant Gordon Charles Steele for his courage and presence of mind when the commanding officer of his boat was fatally injured, and for carrying on to sink the Russian battleship *Andrei Pervosvanni*.

Gordon Steele was born at Exeter, in Devon, on 1st November, 1894, the son of a Royal Navy captain, and was a cadet on HMS *Worcester*, a training ship moored on the River Thames. He became a Merchant Navy officer and also, in 1909, a Midshipman in the Royal Naval Reserve.

When the Great War broke out, he joined the Royal Navy and had an adventurous service life. After a brief spell in a battleship, he served first on submarines, then on 'Q' Ships, the decoy vessels which were deployed to counter the German U-boat menace. Mentioned in despatches, he was promoted Lieutenant and served in the battleship *Royal Oak*, at the Battle of Jutland and later had command of two small vessels before taking part in the Kronstadt raid.

Retiring from the Royal Navy on half-pay in 1929, he became Captain Superintendent of his old Training Ship, the *Worcester*, until his retirement in 1957, when he held the rank of Commander, R.N.

Commander Gordon Charles Steele, V.C., died at Winkleigh, Devon on 4th January, 1981 after a long, gallant and eventful life.