

A Dangerous Game

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Following up Lt Cdr Martyn Holloway's story of 11MCM in the Falklands, herewith details of the recovery and rendering safe of the new type of mine laid by the Argentine Navy.

Recovery

The gist of this story appeared in TON Talk Edition 126, June 2007 but Cdr Bruen has kindly now given us more details - **Editor**

Extract from war diary of Fleet Clearance Diving Team 3 - Friday 25th June 1982

... An interesting day. Helo'd out to CORDELLA sweeping in the minefields. Then to JUNELLA who was disposal ship. Weather force 5 and rising. Second mine swept was for recovery. CPO (MW) 'Tough as Teak' Tex Marshall, the Buffer (LS MW Smith) and I went away to it. Buffer bumped it. I bailed out and did an inspection. Managed to roll it over so Tex could see the underside. Looked like a classic 7 horn German mine. Attached two-pennant strop (modified Gemini sling) to the two lifting lugs and eventually got it to JUNELLA, by this time in unswept waters! Tow passed and we went off towards Fitzroy. On arrival, mine taken by two Gemini in tow three miles up the creek while JUNELLA anchored. Mine then anchored and marked. Talking to Chris Meatyard (MCDO Commodore Clapp's staff) by radio, on arrival back at ship, found mine to be same as German GY but smaller. Is this a new mine? Looks like it. Now wait for team (FCDT3) to arrive tomorrow so I can dive on it for an ID.

Well, that's the bones of it; here's what really happened.

Winching down from a helo on to the bridge-deck of a wildly rolling and pitching trawler is an experience that would set anyone's heart racing. Apart from the fact that the deck is rising and falling at an alarming rate, even in the middle of the ship, there are other, nastier things trying to get you. As the ship plunges about, the mast and derricks describe great arcs in the air and attempt to bludgeon the descending man when he is not looking. Attached to these aerial coshes are guys and stays of taut wire-ropes that endeavour to trap and tear at a fellow too. There is not a great deal that you can do about all this, except fend off as best you can and put your trust in pilot and winchman. As they are Fleet Air Arm, you can be pretty certain that, however many goes it takes, you will be set down in one piece; for they are the world's experts at this sort of thing.

Shortly after my arrival in CORDELLA, the second mine of the day was swept. There followed a discussion with the Command (the renowned Lt Cdr Martyn Holloway) as to what it was and what we should do with it. None of the Clearance Divers could positively identify it as something we knew, though it did bear a resemblance to one of the German horned mines of the Second World War. The mine, or one just like it, needed to be recovered, since no-one knew just what kind of weapon this was. The weather was deteriorating, and the general opinion of the Command was that live mine recovery in those conditions was not on and perhaps the next one, swept in better weather, would do just as well.

Extract from contemporary RN publication:

"The decision to recover a drifting mine by towing it ashore should not be made lightly . . . it may be possible to secure a hemp hawser to a lifting strop or eyebolt but this should be attempted only under ideal weather conditions . . . a decision to use render safe procedures may be made only if the mine can be positively identified ..."

I argued that a mine on the surface is worth any number still submerged, so the capture was on. Borrowing a woolly bear and a rubber bag (acrylic-pile longjohns and a diving suit), I proceeded to the stern for transfer to the mine disposal ship, JUNELLA, that was following along behind. If my arrival had been somewhat spectacular, then so was my departure, although these boys did it every day. The Gemini was allowed to slide stern first down the net recovery ramp aft, and then checked before hitting the water. With the crew in the rubber boat, the signal was given to let go, the boat fell off the ramp and was left floating in the wash as the ship continued on her way. The engine started first time and round we swung, bouncing over the waves towards JUNELLA. Only able to see our destination on each wave crest, we approached from aft (in true clearance divers' fashion). The Gemini was driven boldly up the ramp as far as it would go (and you have to get your wave timing just right to achieve this), hooked onto the winch and hauled up to the deck. What a way to arrive! - splendid seamanship coupled with confidence and daring.

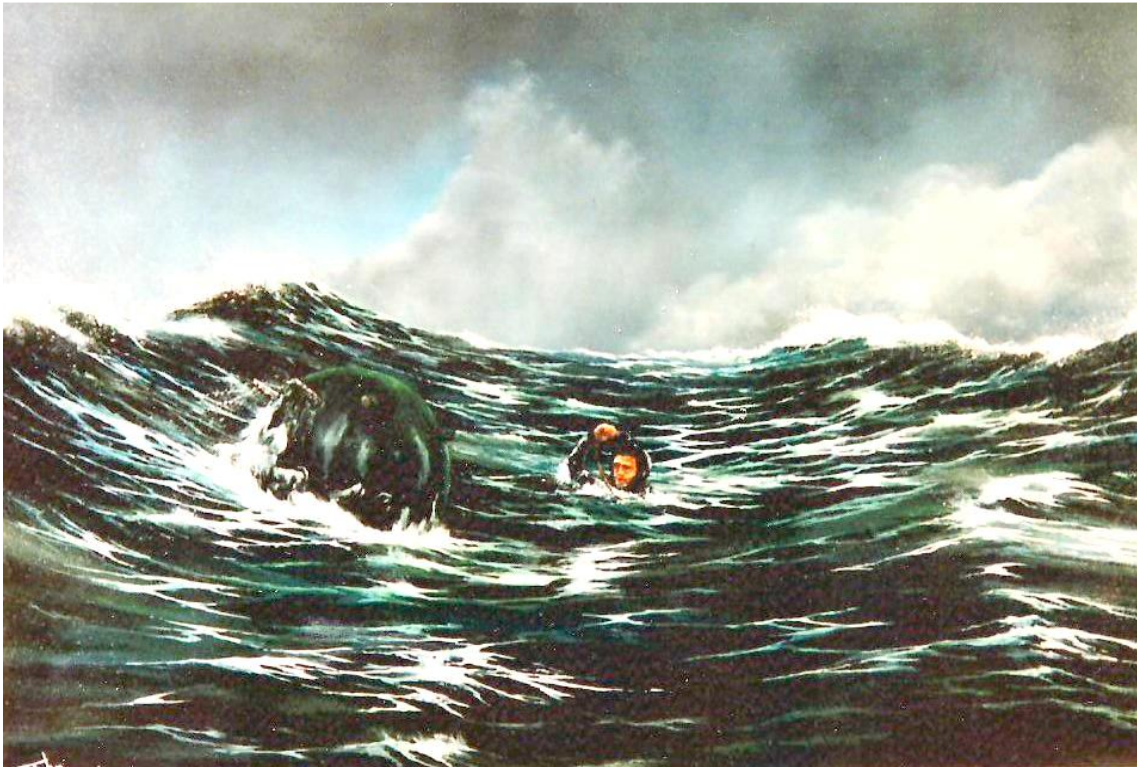
Once onboard, having made my number with the Captain (my old friend Mark Rowledge) and explained the situation, I met up again with Tex, the Mine Warfare Chief, and we set about working out how to capture our prey. We had noticed two eye-plates that showed from time to time as the seven-tenths submerged mine wallowed in the foam-streaked sea.

A Gemini lifting pennant of wire rope was lashed into three legs and made ready in the recovery boat. None of us had ever had occasion to snaffle a live mine before so, once again, it was a question of minimum numbers. My job was to do the hands-on stuff, Tex was the recorder and recognition expert and Smudge, the Buffer, was cox'n of the rubber boat. Perhaps, when we got a close look, we would find that it was of a known 'brand' and we would not have to recover it after all. JUNELLA could then sink it by gunfire and we could all go home.

We launched and rode, getting visual indications from 'mother' on the crest of each wave. Having reached the mine, we proceeded to circle it. There was nothing to see that we had not already noted by binoculars from the ship's bridge; so now we would have to look underneath.

This particular type of mine is actuated by a ship hitting it and bending one of the soft lead horns. Inside, a glass vial of electrolite then fractures, the liquid runs into a waiting battery and an instant electrical charge is shot to the detonator which, thus encouraged, does its business with the primer and explodes the main charge. This blows a ruddy great hole in the ship which then sinks. This much we could tell without difficulty. Consequently it was important not to bump or hang on to these convenient, though lethal, handholds. We did not know how many horns there were below the water, nor their positions. Unfortunately the Buffer did just that in the atrocious conditions but, the boat being flexible, didn't initiate such an ultimately dire sequence. Lucky !

Still, no problem: just have a little swim round and see what's what. Bailing out of the Gemini, I approached the mine and got hold of one of the eye-plates. This allowed me to orientate myself towards the mine and start to investigate the underside by feel, something at which we clearance divers are most adept. Whilst I was carrying out this initial inspection, a larger wave with a breaking top advanced unseen upon the situation and suddenly I was in a welter of foam and thrown heavily against the device. My shoulder came hard into contact with one of the horns - which bent. I pushed off and Tex said later that it looked like someone playing with a large beach-ball in the surf.



Swimming back and grappling the mine once again, I managed to roll it over to expose the bottom plate and mooring lever to Tex's scrutiny. The action clinched the matter since, although it resembled the classic German mine, this one proved to be something entirely new to us and it would have to be taken apart.

I swam with the towing pennant to the mine and clipped the spring hooks onto the eye-plates. Everything fitted nicely and I swam back to the boat. Now began the dodgy bit, towing it back to the ship. If the waves turned the mine and the wire pennant bent a horn, we were not far enough away in our little boat to escape the subsequent blast. No matter, plug on! Somehow we did not seem to be getting any nearer to the mother ship. We were making slow and uncomfortable progress, climbing up one sea and racing down the other side, before coming up all standing as the tow rope jerked taut. Eventually JUNELLA came to us. We bent a lengthy hawser onto our tow rope, slipped off and were recovered up the ramp.

On the bridge, as we started the long haul into Fitzroy Sound with the mine following on behind, I asked Mark how it was he had taken so long to get to us. He pointed out that we had drifted into unswept waters and, when it became apparent that we were not going to be able to tow the mine out against the wind and sea, he had stood-to, closed down and come to collect us. A courageous decision and typical of the man.

Arriving at Fitzroy, JUNELLA went in as far as she could, cast the mine adrift and anchored. As dusk was falling, we took two Geminis on parallel tow lines (long ones) and pulled the 'beast' a mile or so into calm and shallower water. Here we anchored it for the night, lit by a battery of flashing beacon lights. We did not want anyone to bump into it, not after all the trouble we had taken over its capture.

Render Safe

*Continued with an extract from Cdr Bruen's book "Keep your Head Down" - **Editor***

Two days later, on 27 June 1982, the time had come to beach the mine, and LS(D) 'Tommo' Thompson (who had always been at my right hand whenever there had been dodgy tasks to undertake) and I went ahead of the other two Geminis to find a convenient strand suitable to our needs. We explored the shore and a couple of creeks but everywhere there was thick kelp lying off shore. This would prevent a successful beaching operation. In one creek, sitting atop an emplacement used by the guns bombarding the Stanley defences, there was an enormous eagle. He did not seem concerned by the sound of the engine, nor by our greetings to him, and it occurred to us that he might have been deafened by the guns. As we came close he spread his huge wings and languidly flapped away. Perhaps, after all, he had seen so much that two men in a Gemini were really not worth bothering about.

Shifting further along the shore, we came across a low, sandy headland protected by an off-shore sand-bar. There was no kelp and it seemed to be a good place for a mine beaching. Our recce proved that this was indeed the perfect spot, even to the disused sangar a short way up the slope that could be used as a bunker.

CPO(D) 'Piggy' Trotter (2 i/c FCDT3 - clad as always in his signature duffle coat), CPO(MW) Tex Marshall (renowned Navy boxer) and JUNELLA's mine-warfare ratings arrived with the Junella Sledge and the mine in tow.

The Sledge was a brilliant piece of improvisation designed to move the mine clear of the high water mark. Consisting of a lengthwise bisected 55gallon oil drum surmounted by an inverted pallet and a pusser's lifebuoy, it was hoped that the mine would nestle securely thereon and thus make the transition from sea to land without any trauma.



It was taken inshore and the MWs laid out their longest hawser inland from it. The next, rather more difficult phase was to walk the mine over the sand-bar and seat it upon the Sledge. Piggy stayed to seaward with a couple of companions in one Gemini and all the rest retired

inland. Tommo and I slipped into the freezing water and headed for the sullenly-floating mine.

Due to shortages, we had but one pair of neoprene gloves between us and these we shared, each wearing a glove on the hand that would grasp the underwater projections of the 'beast'. The two of us were either side of the mine as we slowly guided it shoreward until our feet touched bottom. Close to the sand-bar the water became quite shallow and the mine had to be gently but firmly lifted to clear the seabed. This took a little time since it weighed some hundreds of pounds and must not be allowed to roll and damage a horn.

Suddenly there came a shout from Piggy: "Leopard Seal !!!"

Of all the creatures in these waters, this was the one to fear. The seal family's answer to the shark, it would ferociously attack anything that swims. Looking out to sea, we saw a huge, dark creature bearing down upon us with its head and shoulders well above the surface and its moustachios bristling.

It came at such a speed that it produced a bow wave and a wash; but there is not much you can do about that when you are balancing a mine in waist-deep water. Then it dived.



Well, there was not much we could do about that either. If we let go of the mine it would hit the bottom, probably explode and vapourise us - - however it would also kill the seal. If we continued lifting the mine inshore, the seal would most likely attack; then we would almost certainly let go of the mine, which would hit the bottom, explode, vapourise us - - and in all probability kill the seal as well.

But if we kept very still..... Actually, I don't reckon seals are that stupid; a bit short sighted, perhaps; but as soon as he saw the horns on the mine he decided to go >>>>>> that-a-way.

Minutes passed as we continued shorewards but the creature did not reappear.

Having managed by main force to half lift, half float the mine over the sand-bank, we reached the slightly deeper waters beyond and the waiting Junella Sledge. This had been ballasted with divers' weight belts but even so we had to stand upon it to ease the great, green sphere into its place.



Once we had it secured, the signal was given to Piggy, now ashore, to start the heave. The men were a good way off and the hawser was heavy but, with the aid of planks on the soft sand and with Tommo and me steadying, they managed to drag the Sledge and its cargo up above the high-water mark.

As Piggy said at the time, "I hope the RAF EOD boys don't come along. They will see it above the high-water mark and claim it as theirs." This refers to an incident at Red Beach, after the Hospital was bombed, when the RAF Explosive Ordnance Disposal team disputed the 'ownership' of some of the unexploded bombs that they and we were dealing with !

So we left it there for the time being and returned to the ship to make final preparations for the Render Safe Procedure (RSP). Tommo left a note on it:

"Please do not touch. Gone for lunch. Back soon. FCDT3"

In order to render mines and bombs safe, the Royal Navy equips its Clearance Diving Teams with all manner of splendid, if old-fashioned, doohickeys and guilguys. There are devices for x-raying metal to see the inner workings of a weapon. There is a wonderful non-magnetic tool kit, full of grabbers, twistors, wrenchers, prisers, pullers and lifters, packed in five large boxes, that is capable of dealing with any situation. There are lights, cameras and far-lookers, remote control robots, blocks, pulleys, stakes and cordage, as well as a host of other gear. None of this did we have.

We wanted it - yes. We had asked for it back in UK before leaving, but we had been told that ... "we would not need it. It's far too valuable to be taken into a war zone and, anyway, someone else might need it."

It would seem that there were some very fogged-up crystal balls around in VERNON at that time !

I was not happy about it then, I was no happier about it as we prepared to take the mine apart and I am still pretty much p****d off about it now, thirty years later !

All officers and senior rates in the Clearance Diving branch are trained in the delicate task of obtaining access to and removing fuses and detonators; but what we had seen in films and on television, the man crouched beside the weapon, carefully removing its component parts by hand, does not happen any more. Remote RSP is the name of the game and that was what we were about this time. Unfortunately, having none of the proper kit, it was a question of using what was to hand. One thing we knew from inspecting our quarry was that it was neither magnetic nor acoustic, so we could use ordinary tools at a pinch. However, we had been told that, in all probability, it was equipped with anti-stripping devices or booby-traps; those amusing little extras that the enemy fits to take out the operator by arranging for the mine to detonate at an inopportune moment. We believed that these would be either light-sensitive or fitted into the circuitry or mechanism - probably the latter: an interesting problem to solve.



We worked out in advance exactly what steps would be taken. Each one would be signalled to the sangar at start and finish so that, if something went wrong and the mine detonated, the back-up team would know what **not** to do next time. Piggy, Tex and Tommo then retired to the bunker and the RSP was started. At the end of each set of actions an inspection was undertaken and the next set worked out. It was a long but fascinatingly dangerous game to play.

Using a hammer, a padded chisel, an adjustable spanner, a bag of explosives (Piggy was a master at 'explosive surgery' using the minutest amounts of plastique), and a very long piece of string for remote control, we eventually reached the stage where there was but one course of action left to us. We could see a brass cylinder with a wing nut and two ball-catches on it but could not see a connection to the electrical circuitry. It was clear that here was either the detonator or a sliding primer that fitted around a hidden initiator. Either way, it had to come out. There was no chance, deep inside the casing that it was, that we would be able to remove it remotely, as we had been denied the proper tools for the job. It would have to be taken out by hand.

But which way to turn it ? Could this be the classic anti-stripping device ?

There was no way to determine either answer except by doing it.

We had to know how these things worked because our ships were still out there looking for them. There was no time to waste and dusk was approaching. We four had a final chat together and then went our separate ways: three to the bunker, one to the beach.

Back to the problem. Undo the retaining wing nut. - Done. - Push the cylinder in and up. - Yes. - Then, should it be turned clockwise or anti-clockwise? One way - it might detonate. The other - it might not. Or vice-versa. Which way to go? Frozen into indecision. A last look round and then decide.

I remember, as in a photograph, that it was a peaceful evening. Looking south and west, the colours of the approaching dusk were quite beautiful over the low headlands and inlets of Fitzroy Sound. A single helicopter, a little north of the usual route, was steadily approaching. I suppose he must have noticed something on the beach, for he veered towards us and came to a hover nearby.

Now, if you are flying a chopper on a stores run, I should imagine that things can get a little monotonous and any unusual sight must be welcome; but when that sight is a kneeling man with half his arm thrust inside a large, green, very obviously horned mine, and when you notice other men crouched low in a sangar nearby, vigorously waving you away, it would not be surprising if you suddenly lost your curiosity. So, pulling full collective lift, the helo launched itself violently up and back from the hover and shot away south-eastwards, as if attached to a bungee cord.

The spell was broken. Decision. Twist anti-clockwise - and - la voila ! One detonator removed. One mine rendered safe. Phew!

Dusk was falling as we put the now harmless mine back together and manhandled it into the water. There followed a long, cold haul back to JUNELLA, and under the stern arc-lights we transferred the tow to the lifting equipment in order to hoist the mine inboard. Piggy was fumbling with one hand under the weapon, trying for an eye-plate, when into the light of the arcs swam, just below us, some pretty little dolphins with black and white markings much reminiscent of the.....

"Killer whale!!" Tommo and I shouted to Piggy, who took one look and snatched his hand inboard. Well, it repaid him for his 'Leopard seal !' It is always nice to end the day with a laugh and this jape broke the tension to which we had all been subject.

JUNELLA's ship's company must have wondered why the four of us were collapsed in the boat, helpless with mirth.

