Unknown and uncharted shores
Combined Operations, the bravest of the brave

by Richard Swaine

Towards the eastern end of Hayling seafront there is a monument you may have noticed. It highlights the extreme bravery and hazardous operations that the men of the Combined Operations Pilotage Parties (COPP) undertook during WWII. At the height of operations over 150 servicemen were assigned to *HMS Northney*, previously The Hayling Island Sailing Club (HISC). This whole area and the building were requisitioned in 1942 by the War Office and all sailing activities suspended. A plaque inside the club pays tribute to the courage and sacrifice these men gave for their country.

The COPP leader was Nigel Clogstoun-Willmott, DSO, DSC, RN. Last year, HISC celebrated its 100th anniversary. One hundred flags were produced to commemorate the highlights of the club for each year. The years 1942–1945 focussed on the Combined Operations Pilotage Parties.

So why is this local story important?
In 1942 we, the Allies, experienced the humiliation of Dunkirk and Dieppe. One of the main issues was that the tracks of most of the Churchill tanks were caught up in the shingle beach and could not move further. Immediately afterwards the Allies began to study the beach geology of where they intended to land and put plans in place to adapt vehicles accordingly. Dunkirk and Dieppe taught us that the Royal Navy would have to land the Army not in heavily defended ports but across defended open beaches.

There were of course charts and maps but these are generally to help vessels to keep away from coastal hazards not to help them onto the beaches. Anyway, the charts and maps were not reliable. It was agreed that a seaborne invasion could only be achieved by 'hands on' beach reconnaissance.

The COPP team was assembled in the winter of 1942 and put through very hard 'conditioning' training. Some of the preparation included night swimming using very elementary suits that were certainly not waterproof. In January the Solent is freezing.

So little was known at the time, and for years afterwards, about this section of the services. Nothing was ever mentioned by the press or on the wireless. All COPP work was classified as 'Most Secret'. Once recruited, all the COPP teams signed the Official Secrets Act because, once briefed, they would know the clear details about future landings onto enemy occupied territory.

The first use of COPP was for the invasion of North Africa on 8th November 1942. This

was reasonably successful although some of the beach surveillance did not detect sandbars and hollows that the landing craft 'grounded on', resulting in the Army leaping into water up to their necks.

On return from Gibraltar in November 1942, the organisation had to be reset-up and fully trained with better communications, improved kayaks and rubber suits. Offshore night training continued and the pace quickened. In January 1943, 16 of the COPP team were drafted to the Mediterranean. Their equipment and kayaks were sent ahead. They were given plans for detailed beach surveys over three nights, both to the north and south of Sicily.

Sicily

On 27th February 1943, after a few weeks of practical runs and familiarisation procedures, four submarines sailed for their rendezvous at preallocated positions off Sicily.

On a dark night around midnight with the Sicilian coastline about four miles ahead, the submarines surfaced and the two-man kayaks launched. After a final confirmation regarding the rendezvous timings, the 4 x 2 man COPP teams waved their farewells. The submarines withdrew to sea and submerged to around 60 feet for a few hours. The submarines were 'on station' between 1st and 12th March 1943.

In total darkness with minimum instruments, each team made its way to a prearranged beach. The 'paddler' was to anchor and hold station about half a mile from the coast and the 'swimmer' eased himself out of the kayak and swam to the shore.

Once the 'swimmers' felt the bottom of the coastline, they began their missions while the 'paddler' waited out at sea, cold and in the dark for some 3 – 4 hours, hoping to see a light from his returning teammate so enabling each team to return to their assigned submarine.

These activities were undertaken over three nights and we know from first hand that of the 16 men who surveyed the Sicilian beaches, only five got back to Malta, five were lost (presumed drowned, no known grave), and six captured, never to be seen again. To this day we cannot comprehend such bravery.

In summary, valuable beach conditions were acquired and specific beaches chosen for the landings. The planners now knew the gradients of underwater approaches, obstacles, sand-bars, rocks, beach consistency, land surfaces, mined areas, beach defences, barbed wire, beach exits, natural hazards, lookouts, sentry posts, mobile sentries with dogs, gun emplacements and enemy positions. These details were mapped and charted for the invasion we now know as "Operation Husky" which took place on 8th July 1943.

Italy surrendered to the Allies on 8th September 1943. Meanwhile, in the autumn of 1943 the Allies' focus turned to fortress Europe. The Photo Intelligence Service were now examining the results of low flying sorties that extended from Norway to Spain. This would confirm that all channel ports were heavily defended. The coastline the Allies aimed to breach was Normandy (a chilling prospect).

Normandy

Around midnight on 31st December 1943 and in total darkness, two of the COPP team left their landing craft, and swam ashore to the French coast against forceful currents. In over two hours they managed to avoid sentries and mines, and calculated the tidal stream. The real difficulty was that at every 50 yards they had to measure the distance and to 'dig in' with their beach augers to fill their sheaths with sand and shoreline material. After successfully signalling to seaward they were picked up at all speed, exhausted, wet and cold. The first men to land on the invasion beaches of Normandy.

Two weeks later a proper beach reconnaissance was ordered and so a team

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embarked on the midget submarine X20 to return to Normandy. For this operation the submarine, originally designed for a crew of three, carried five men including two COPP swimmers. Conditions were very cramped.

By the end of May 1944 the order came to prepare for the Normandy landings and this time only midget submarines would be needed. These to act as beacons for the D Day invasion force. They sailed from Portsmouth on 1st June 1944.

X20 CO Lieutenant Kenneth Hudspeth, DSC and 2 Bars, RANVR was directed to Gold beach (off Port en Bessin) and onboard would be S/Lt Robin Harbud RNVR, later to live in Emsworth and become Commodore of the Emsworth Sailing Club in 1981.

S/Lt Jim Booth secures X23 on D Day + 1. Photo from Robin Walton's book 'An Island at War'

X23, CO Lieutenant George Honour, DSC, RNVR, was directed to Sword beach (off Colleville sur Orne). Saint-Aubin-sur-Mer, (now twinned with Emsworth) is about halfway between the two landing beaches of Juno and Sword.

Without the fortitude and courage of the men from Combined Operations Pilotage Parties, many believe our planned invasions of enemy occupied territories from the sea would have been disastrous. This article tells a story which, for some reason, always seems be omitted from books and films that cover these invasions.

Europe was not the end of the COPP war. Many were re-assigned to The Far East including, S/Lt Robin Harbud RNVR to re-occupy countries held by the Japanese.

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