



St Nazaire The Greatest Raid Of All

St Nazaire on the South Brittany coast was one of the most important Atlantic ports for the occupying Germans. St Nazaire is just at the mouth of the mighty Loire River and was home to two of the U Boat flotilla that preyed on the shipping bringing much needed supplies to Britain from America.

It also had the largest dry dock in Europe and was the only dry dock capable of taking the German Battleship "Tirpitz". The lock had large gates at both ends and it was these gates that seemed the best hope of denying the use of the dry dock to the Tirpitz.

The dock area was without doubt one of the most heavily fortified places in the whole of Europe.

In early 1942 the British Navy decided to mount an operation against the dry dock, and it became a combined operations effort involving the Army Commandoes.

The Navy, although keen to see the dock immobilised, failed to release the necessary ships to support the main effort.

HMS Campbeltown, an old first world war American destroyer, was disguised to make her look like a German motor torpedo boat of the Mowe class.

This entailed removing two of her four stacks and some remodeling of the superstructure, five tons of explosive were fitted below decks in the bow.

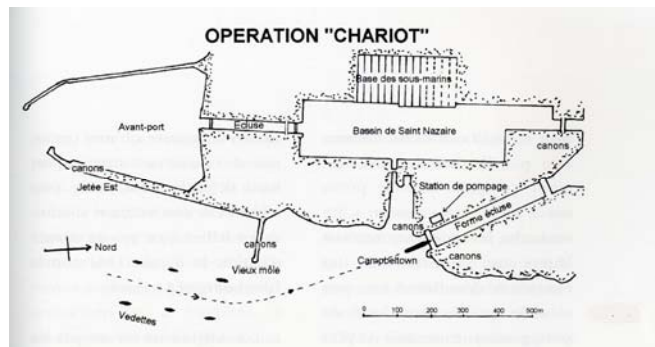
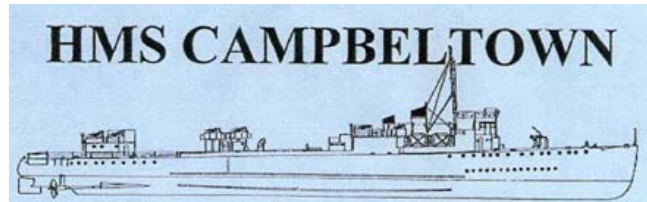
The explosion would be detonated with a delay action fuse.

She set sail from Falmouth on March 27 1942. Accompanying her was an escort of nearly twenty patrol boats.

These patrol boats were made of wood and not at all suited to a long sea voyage.

To make matters worse they carried petrol in cans above the decks for the return journey and this made them very inflammable.

The flotilla entered the mouth of the Loire during the night of March 28th and the Campbeltown rammed the lock gates at full speed, coming to rest astride the main gate.



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The commandoes on board the destroyer sabotaged many of the dock installations. So great was their effort, that the dry dock was out of operation for ten years.

Most of the Commandoes on the patrol craft failed to get ashore because of the murderous fire from both sides of the river and also from German ships in the harbour.

For some unknown reason the explosives in the hull of the Campbeltown did not explode until lunchtime and some one hundred and fifty Germans, inspecting and looting the ship went up with her.

To add further confusion a MTB boat (MTB74) had also accompanied the Campbeltown and fired two torpedoes with delay fuses at the old lock gates.

These too exploded later in the day creating even more panic and confusion to the Germans.

Of the six hundred Navy and Army personnel who set out on the raid, almost a quarter were killed, and more than two hundred were captured by the Germans.

Although this raid achieved its main purpose, with the hindsight of history it achieved far more.

This was the first attack on occupied France, and it made the French people realise that there was still resistance to Nazi Germany.

During the raid some French people also started firing on the Germans with guns they had hidden.

This confused the Germans into thinking they were being attacked by a much bigger force.

After the raid many Resistance

groups sprang up in France and the Germans no longer ruled over a subservient nation.

Later, after the war had ended, President De Gaulle said of the raid,

"The raid on St Nazaire was the first to give us hope that the Germans might be defeated"

