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THE ATTACK ON ST. NAZAIRE, 1942.

The following Despatch was submitted to the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty on the 13th April, 1942, by Admiral of the Fleet Sir CHARLES M. FORBES, G.C.B., D.S.O., Commander-in-Chief, Plymouth.

*Plymouth Command,
13th April, 1942.*

I regard the attack on St. Nazaire on the 28th March, 1942, the report of which is herewith forwarded for the information of Their Lordships, as more difficult than that on Zeebrugge, as a large weakly-armed force had to make an undetected passage of over 400 miles to the scene of action at an average speed of 11½ knots, through an area usually covered by the enemy's air reconnaissances. The success of the attack reflects great credit on all who took part, but chiefly on Commander R. E. D. Ryder, Royal Navy, who displayed, not only during the operation, but in the preparations beforehand, outstanding qualities of leadership, ingenuity and determination.

2. The manner in which he bluffed his way past the defences of the Loire to within a mile of the objective was admirable and was carefully worked out beforehand.

3. Results of the Operation.

(a) The principal object of the attack was achieved, as the large lock capable of taking the TIRPITZ should be out of action for a considerable time. The outer caisson was destroyed by the blowing up of H.M.S. CAMPBELTOWN, and the demolition parties destroyed the pumping station and the operating mechanism of the outer and inner caissons. Commander Ryder speaks very

highly of the speed with which these military demolitions were carried out.

(b) The demolition of other port facilities including the possible destruction of the caisson at the Old Entrance.

Subsidiary results were:—

(c) The killing of a considerable number of Germans, partly by their own fire.

(d) The certain damage, and probable sinking of, a U-boat by H.M.S. TYNEDALE.

(e) The destruction of a number of enemy aircraft by H.M.S. BROCKLESBY, M.L.S. and aircraft of No. 19 Group, R.A.F.

(f) The probable diversion of troops and armament to Biscay ports.

(g) The moral effect on the enemy of an attack on one of his principal bases.

4. *Losses.* Our naval losses amounted to 34 officers and 157 ratings killed or missing out of a total of 62 officers and 291 ratings who sailed from England. A considerable number of these are likely to be prisoners of war. Of the 18 coastal craft employed, ten were sunk by enemy action, one was destroyed by our own forces as it was unable to make the return journey, three were destroyed by our own forces by order of the Commanding Officer of H.M.S. CLEVELAND, as he considered they were unable to make the return journey (a decision with which I do not agree), and four returned safely but damaged. Taking into consideration the extreme vulnerability of the coastal craft, neither the losses in men or material can be considered as excessive for the results achieved.

The losses in Commando troops, 34 officers and 178 other ranks out of 44 officers and 224 other ranks, were high, but again it is hoped that a number have survived as prisoners of war.

5. *Surprise.* For success, surprise was essential. The unseen passage to the Loire was due partly to favourable weather conditions, which helped to prevent the force being detected from the air, and partly to careful routeing to keep the force out of the tracks of Zenits* and reconnaissance flights by the enemy. It was also due to the almost certain sinking of a U-boat at 0815 on 27th March by H.M.S. TYNE-DALE. Surprise in the final approach was, as pointed out in paragraph 2, due to the methods employed by Commander Ryder to deceive the enemy.

It was also fortunate that there were no patrols covering the approach over the mud flats.

That surprise was not complete was principally due to the noise of the M.L.s' engines (which, on a still night, are clearly audible three miles away) and to the inability of our bomber aircraft to locate their targets in the difficult weather conditions. Though the bombers (for whose services I had asked) fulfilled a useful purpose by helping to drown with their engines the noise of the M.L.s' approach, their presence overhead ensured that every A.A. gun in the neighbourhood was manned and ready to open fire at any moment. Whilst the air activity covered the approach of the seaborne forces, it thus meant that these guns, unimpeded by falling bombs, were able to concentrate their fire on the M.L.s once the alarm was given.

6. *Fatigue.* Thanks to the fine weather and probably also to the stimulus provided by the prospect of attacking the enemy, there were no reports of fatigue being observed among the naval forces before the attack.

Those officers and men who returned in the coastal craft arrived in very good heart, but reaction followed in about 24 hours and they would not have been fit for further operations for some days.

7. *Fitting out of H.M.S. CAMPBELTOWN.* The work done by Devonport dockyard was admirably quick and efficient. I have requested the Admiral Superintendent to convey my appreciation to all concerned.

8. *Co-operation with Aircraft of Coastal Command.* Although not referred to in the report, aircraft of 19 Group, R.A.F. did much useful work in covering the withdrawal of the forces from St. Nazaire. 20 sorties occupying 105 flying hours were carried out during which 1 H.E.III and 2 H.E.II5 were encountered, and 1 enemy aircraft was destroyed. A/S sweeps in the Bay of Biscay were also carried out during the outward passage of the force; these were arranged because such sweeps are the normal procedure in suitable weather, and they provided a measure of security for our surface forces without arousing enemy suspicions.

9. *Conclusion.* There is little in this report about the admirable work ashore of the Commando troops because unfortunately none who took part has returned to tell the tale; nor is

there any officer from H.M.S. CAMPBELTOWN to give the full story of her gallant exploit.

Results must be the silent witnesses of their achievements.

(Signed) C. M. FORBES,
*Admiral of the Fleet,
Commander-in-Chief.*

ENCLOSURE.

10th A/S Striking Force.
1st April, 1942.

I have the honour to submit the following report of proceedings for Operation "Chariot" from the time of sailing at 1400 on 26th March, 1942 until joined by H.M.S. CLEVELAND and H.M.S. BROCKLESBY at 0906 on 28th March, 1942.

(Signed) R. E. D. RYDER,
*Commander, R.N.,
Senior Officer,
10th A/S Striking Force.*

GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF THE OPERATION.

Briefly this operation constituted a frontal attack by a small force of unarmoured vessels on the heavily defended port of St. Nazaire. To a greater extent than possibly ever before did we rely on the element of surprise. In this and in many other features the raid resembled that of the Zeebrugge raid of the last war; we had however certain disadvantages. Our force was smaller, we were more liable to detection from the air and by R.D.F.* which was to our disadvantage, also Zeebrugge had direct access from the open sea whereas we had to go into a river mouth, and finally the tremendous development in close range rapid firing weapons constituted a formidable threat to our wooden craft carrying petrol. These factors, then, had to be faced in drawing up the naval and military plan for the attack.

2. The principal object of this raid was the destruction of the large entrance lock to the Penhoet basin, the secondary object was to render tidal the basins containing the submarine pens. The plan in brief, was for the CAMPBELTOWN to ram the outer lock gate, for the troops from No. 2 Commando to scramble ashore over her bow and then, having started a delay action fuse, to scuttle the CAMPBELTOWN so that she would blow up with 3 tons of high explosive some 2½ hours later and so demolish the gate. In addition to this, landings were to be made from M.L.s at the Old Mole and in the Old Entrance. Landings therefore were planned at three points, and the landing parties were to carry out an extensive programme of demolitions on the dock entrances and lock working machinery.

3. It was agreed by the Force Commander's that the CAMPBELTOWN being the main unit should receive prime consideration in all matters. Light craft were, in fact, to lead her in and give her full supporting fire. The possible alternative that CAMPBELTOWN, a steel ship, should bear the brunt of the fire while the light craft came in under her shelter was discussed but rejected. In our minds and in our plans, therefore, we envisaged sacrificing, if necessary, everything in order to get the CAMPBELTOWN in.

* Admiralty footnote: Zenits—Enemy aircraft flights to obtain daily meteorological data.

* Admiralty footnote: R.D.F.—Radar.

4. We all hoped to get well in undetected and to bluff the enemy for just sufficient time to achieve our object. We had to realise, however, that though we might get in unseen and by bluff, there was no question of doing so on the way out. For this purpose we hoped that smoke would help.

5. The accompanying narrative will I hope show that all ranks and ratings under my orders endeavoured to their utmost to carry the plan through.

6. As far as can be ascertained the principal objective which was allotted to the CAMPBELTOWN and the troops she carried, was entirely successful. The landing carried out at the Old Entrance may have been partially successful but our assault on the Old Mole was repulsed with heavy loss, and it was not possible to re-embark the troops we had landed.

NARRATIVE REPORT ON OPERATION "CHARIOT".

In accordance with the Operational Orders for "Chariot," the 10th A/S Striking Force, consisting of M.G.B. 314 (Headquarters Boat), M.L.s 192, 262, 267, 268, 156, 177, 270 and 160 constituting the 1st Flotilla, M.L.s 447, 341, 457, 307, 443, 306, 446 and 298 constituting the 2nd Flotilla, M.T.B. 74, H.M.S. CAMPBELTOWN (Block ship) and H.M.S.s TYNEDALE and ATHERSTONE (Escorting Destroyers), sailed from Falmouth at 1400/26/3/42. M.L.s were sailed in advance so as to form up outside.

2. The Naval Force Commander took passage in H.M.S. ATHERSTONE with M.G.B. 314 (Flotilla No. O) in tow and left in company with H.M.S. CAMPBELTOWN towing M.T.B. 74 (Flotilla No. 17) and H.M.S. TYNEDALE.

3. The force formed up in Cruising Order No. 2 off D buoy and proceeded down the outward track as laid down by the Commander-in-Chief, Plymouth, at 13 knots. Wind—east north east force 4* with considerable haze.

4. At about 0230 on 27th March the haze cleared and surface visibility was extreme when dawn broke. At dawn German ensigns were hoisted in the destroyers, and White Ensigns hauled down in the ships.

5. At 0700, in position C, course was altered to 112°, and as we had time in hand speed was reduced to 8 knots. This, it was hoped, would reduce our chances of being spotted from the air.

6. At 0720, in position 46° 34' North 05° 41' West, TYNEDALE reported an object bearing 002° which appeared to be either a submarine conning tower or a trawler. TYNEDALE was ordered to investigate and reported a few minutes later that it was a submarine. It appeared to be steering 070°.

At 0736 CAMPBELTOWN was ordered to take charge of the M.L.s in my absence, and ATHERSTONE, slipping M.G.B. 314, proceeded to join TYNEDALE. At 0740, 2 trawlers were sighted to starboard of the submarine. It was my intention to close the trawlers while TYNEDALE dealt with the submarine as it appeared probable that the submarine had a rendezvous with the trawlers, and that we would be reported by W/T. When

TYNEDALE was about 5 miles from the submarine the latter fired a recognition signal of a sort of Very light which burst into 5 or 6 silver stars and spread out in an umbrella shape. After this the submarine continued on the surface, and apparently on the same course. When TYNEDALE had closed to about 4,000 yards she hoisted the White Ensign and opened fire. The submarine crash dived. TYNEDALE subsequently fired a pattern of depth charges. After the first charge the submarine's conning tower broke surface and was immediately engaged by the short-range weapons of TYNEDALE. The conning tower was not visible for more than 20 seconds, but TYNEDALE states that one of his charges exploded within 70 feet of the conning tower and that she was also possibly hit by gunfire.

7. By this time it seemed clear that the trawlers were merely French fishing trawlers without any armament. In any case, it appeared more important to hunt for the submarine with TYNEDALE so I altered towards the position in which she had last been seen. Contact was obtained with a good echo in about the correct position but this faded out at about 1,000 yards. TYNEDALE's asdics were then reported as being out of action and I agreed to a search around the position of last sighting the conning tower, but without obtaining any echoes that could be contacted.

8. At 0920 we broke off the hunt and proceeded to regain the force by an indirect route, steering southwest for 7 miles. The sky became covered with low cloud greatly reducing the prospect of detection from the air. In breaking off the hunt for this U-boat I took into account that within two hours she might surface and make an enemy report. I considered, however, that the U-boat had not sighted the M.L.s and that we would simply be reported as two destroyers steering southwest. I decided therefore to continue.

9. At 1135 TYNEDALE was ordered to investigate a trawler which appeared to be coming across our track from the northward. This trawler was boarded by TYNEDALE, the crew taken off and the ship sunk. The trawler was French, flying a French flag superior to a white triangular flag and carried a German fishing licence.

10. At about 1200 another trawler was sighted fine on our starboard bow. This one I considered my bird, and slipped M.G.B. 314, ordering her to take off all the crew, all the papers, charts, etc., that they could find. I then sank this trawler, which like the other, was French. The whole crew appeared friendly and professed to be keen to come to England. The Captain seemed particularly friendly and quite a good sort. He stated, amongst other things, that they always fished in groups of three just inside the 100 fathom line in about latitude 47°. The Captain also stated that he had swept up some mines, some of which exploded, in position 47° 05' North, 07° 30' West. It seemed quite clear from these two trawlers that none of them carried radio, so I did not consider it necessary to investigate any of the large number that were subsequently seen.

11. At 1240 I received Commander-in-Chief, Plymouth's signal timed 1111/27 stating that

* Admiralty footnote: Wind force 4 = moderate breeze, 11-15 m.p.h.

the 5 torpedo boats previously located in St. Nazaire had been located at Nantes p.m. 25th March. At 1718 I received Commander-in-Chief, Plymouth's signal timed 1704/27 stating that these torpedo boats had again been reported in the neighbourhood of St. Nazaire and might be met. This had to be considered as they constituted a superior force. As however, the submarine had apparently not as yet got a report through, and as we had not been sighted from the air it still seemed probable that our presence was unknown, and there seemed no reason for any change of plan due to the threat which these torpedo boats constituted.

12. At 2000 I stopped and transferred to M.G.B. 314 with the Military Force Commander*. The M.L.s and CAMPBELTOWN were formed up into Special Cruising Order No. 3 and were taken towards position Z at 12 knots, with ATHERSTONE and TYNE-DALE spread on either beam.

13. At 2200 STURGEON's† light was sighted right ahead and we passed within hailing distance at 2215. After passing STURGEON, TYNE-DALE and ATHERSTONE continued on their patrol. Mist came down and visibility became poor down to about 2 miles.

14. From about midnight gun flashes were seen in the distance to the north east. At about 0030 on 28th March when still 12 miles off it was obvious that considerable air activity was in progress as gun flashes extended over a wide arc together with a considerable flak.

15. No definite land was sighted until about 0045 when in the vicinity of Le Chatelier Shoal the northern shore could be dimly discerned. CAMPBELTOWN acting as guide was ordered to steer 050° and M.G.B. 314 thus freed was able to alter course freely to obtain ranges of the shore by R.D.F. and also to run off to either side to obtain soundings. A considerable northerly set was experienced so that the course of 050° was held until Les Morees Tower was passed about two cables to port at about 0125.

16. Up till our arrival at Les Morees Tower no searchlights had been used and we had obviously been undetected. But at this time one searchlight from No. 3 Heavy Coastal Battery was switched on down the Charpentier Channel. The warning had evidently been given and this was the signal for all the searchlights on both banks of the river to be switched on. From that moment the entire force was floodlit but for what seemed like five minutes no fire was opened.

17. During this time we made our bogus identity to the shore signal station at No. 3 Battery and signalled in German that we were "proceeding up harbour in accordance with instruction". On receipt of this signal some of the searchlights switched out but we were then called up from the south entrance and passed a similar message. While this was in progress, however, the force was fired on by light flak from one position so we made the signal for "a vessel considering herself to be

fired on by friendly forces". This stopped him for a bit. At this time we must have been recognised as definitely hostile as we were suddenly fired on heavily and the action became general. It is difficult to describe the full fury of the attack that was let loose on both sides, the air became one mass of red and green tracer travelling in all directions, most of it going over. It did not appear that any of the shore surface* batteries opened fire although the rear portion of the line may have been fired on by them. As soon as the fire was opened a flak ship was observed right ahead and she opened fire from her bridge with some small automatic weapon. Due to the very accurate firing by our pom-pom the flak ship fire was ineffective and was soon silenced although it was necessary to pass uncomfortably close to her.

18. We passed the Old Breakwater Light at about 1½ cables and then sheered off to starboard while the CAMPBELTOWN continued into her objective. We lost her for a while in the glare of the searchlights but at 0134 she struck the lock and we saw a burst of flame on her fo'c'sle, this however seemed to die away after a minute or two and we could only see her Oerlikons firing hard.

19. While M.G.B. 314 hauled round preparatory to going into the land M.L. 160 opened an accurate fire with her 3 pdr. on the flak positions to the east of CAMPBELTOWN and on her starboard bow and silenced them. The leading M.L. of the starboard column, M.L. 192, was the first to be hit and beached herself against the Old Mole ablaze from end to end. It is not known accurately what happened to those in the starboard column following her but some of them anyhow probably succeeded in landing their troops safely in the Old Entrance. At this stage it appeared that the situation was being got under control. Firing had temporarily decreased and was mostly confined to the flak positions on the house tops.

20. The port column, however, was less fortunate. The leading boat, M.L. 447, grounded while still ten feet off the jetty in the face of a withering fire from a pill box on the jetty and flak from the house tops. She attempted to go astern out of it but the M.L. was set ablaze almost at once. The soldiers and crew were most gallantly rescued by M.L. 160.

21. While this was going on we in M.G.B. 314 ran into the Old Entrance and landed Colonel Newman on the south side, who with his staff, hurried off to join his men. Finding one M.L. to be following us in we hailed her to go alongside CAMPBELTOWN's stern which she did and was seen to shove off with a considerable number of her crew. At the same time M.G.B. 314 turned round and secured by the north side of the Old Entrance and received on board some 20 to 30 men from the CAMPBELTOWN.

22. M.T.B. 74 then came in and reported for instructions. I had in mind using her to torpedo the CAMPBELTOWN if the latter's scuttling charges failed. On landing therefore I went and examined the block ship from the dock side and hailed her but she appeared to be deserted.

* Admiralty footnote: The Military Force Commander was Lieutenant Colonel A. C. Newman.

† The Submarine STURGEON was employed as a navigational mark vessel.

* Admiralty footnote: i.e. anti-ship guns as opposed to A.A. guns.

After waiting some ten minutes and seeing four of the scuttling charges go off I considered that all was well. I, therefore, returned to M.G.B.314 and told Sub. Lieut. Wynn in M.T.B.74 to take six of CAMPBELTOWN's crew, torpedo the lock gates at the Old Entrance and proceed back independently.

23. While in the Old Entrance we could hear the military demolition parties doing good work with surprising rapidity. Close by us the building containing the lock working mechanism was blown up, the debris wounding two men on board. This was followed by the pumping house and another shed in the vicinity which was set ablaze. The flames from this shed cast a lurid glow lighting up the adjacent waters and silhouetting craft in the river to the batteries on the opposite bank.

24. Having seen M.T.B.74 torpedo the lock gates at the Old Entrance and leave at high speed I proceeded in M.G.B.314 to see how the assault on the Old Mole was progressing. On leaving the Old Entrance, however, I could see that matters had fared badly there. The approaches were floodlit by searchlights from all directions and a deadly fire was being poured on the M.L.s still gallantly attempting to go alongside.

25. With accurate fire from our pom-pom M.G.B.314 twice silenced the pill box but it came to life again; we also tried to knock out some of the positions on the house tops but these were extremely difficult. At one stage the firing showed signs of decreasing and if only I could have rushed in a force reserve at that moment we might well have carried the positions that were so vital for our withdrawal. As it was I had to realise that at both the landing places the opposition was now getting the upper hand.

26. All this time M.G.B.314 was lying stopped about 100 yards off the Old Entrance and although fired on fairly continually by flak positions and hit many times she was by the Grace of God not set ablaze. On looking round the harbour, however, I counted about seven or eight blazing M.L.s and was forced to realise that M.G.B.314 was the only craft left in sight. In consequence of this a more concentrated fire was directed upon her so she dropped a naval smoke float while I called a council of war. No withdrawal signal had been sent and no contact made with the shore by W/T. There was still at least another half an hour before one could expect any of the landing party to reach the point of evacuation. I would have returned to the Old Entrance but I could see a heavy cross fire across this inlet and it appeared that enemy forces on both banks were shooting at each other. It was clearly impossible for M.G.B.314 to return. With some thirty to forty men on board and her decks piled with seriously wounded I decided at 0250 that she was in no position to take off the soldiers we had landed. It was unlikely that M.G.B.314 would survive another five minutes with the fire that was then being concentrated in her direction and so I left at high speed.

27. When abreast of the southernmost Mole M.G.B.314 passed another surviving M.L. and I instructed her to follow and laid smoke for her. During their withdrawal both craft were

floodlit by searchlights and subjected to intense cross fire from both banks of the river. On passing Les Morees Towet the coastal artillery opened fire on them and continued to straddle them with near misses until in the vicinity of Le Chatelier Shoal about four miles off the land. Splinters from a nearby shell caused further casualties on board M.G.B.314, killing her pom-pom gunlayer.

28. Just when we were beginning to get out of the searchlights M.G.B.314 came upon an armed trawler which opened an uncomfortably heavy fire upon her but fortunately she did no serious damage.

29. After another ten minutes I came across M.L.270 who was steering from aft. She seemed capable of doing 15 knots so we went on together. After a further ten minutes a short action was seen to take place to the north westward between what appeared to be a small vessel firing tracer and a larger vessel, but I altered to the southward to keep clear.

30. At about 0330 a further action was seen to take place to the south westward between heavier forces.

31. I passed position Y at 0430 and continued towards position T at 12 knots in view of possible interference by the 5 enemy torpedo boats.

32. When it got light I reduced to 8 knots and M.L.270 opened out to 3 miles. With the daylight the atmosphere seemed to clear, and the visibility again becoming extreme, I saw another M.L. some way astern. I therefore stopped and altered round to close her. A few minutes later ATHERSTONE and TYNEDALE appeared over the horizon. I had several very seriously wounded on board and more than a dozen less seriously wounded, so I immediately went alongside ATHERSTONE to transfer them and make up the M.G.B.'s crew, of whom only four seamen remained, with volunteers from the ATHERSTONE.

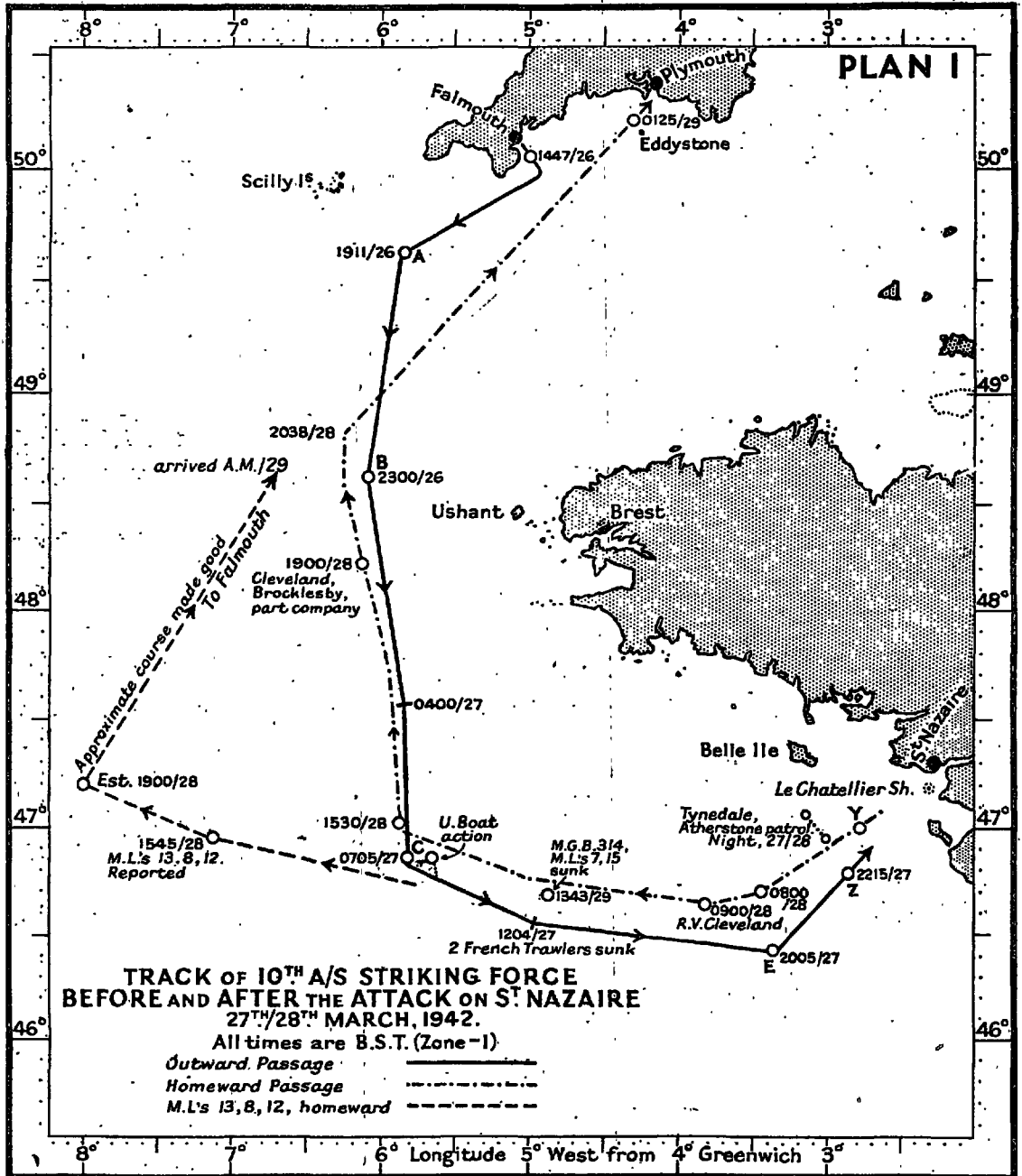
33. M.G.B.314 had been holed in the starboard side of the fore peak and the water was gaining slowly but it seemed probable that this could be kept in hand.

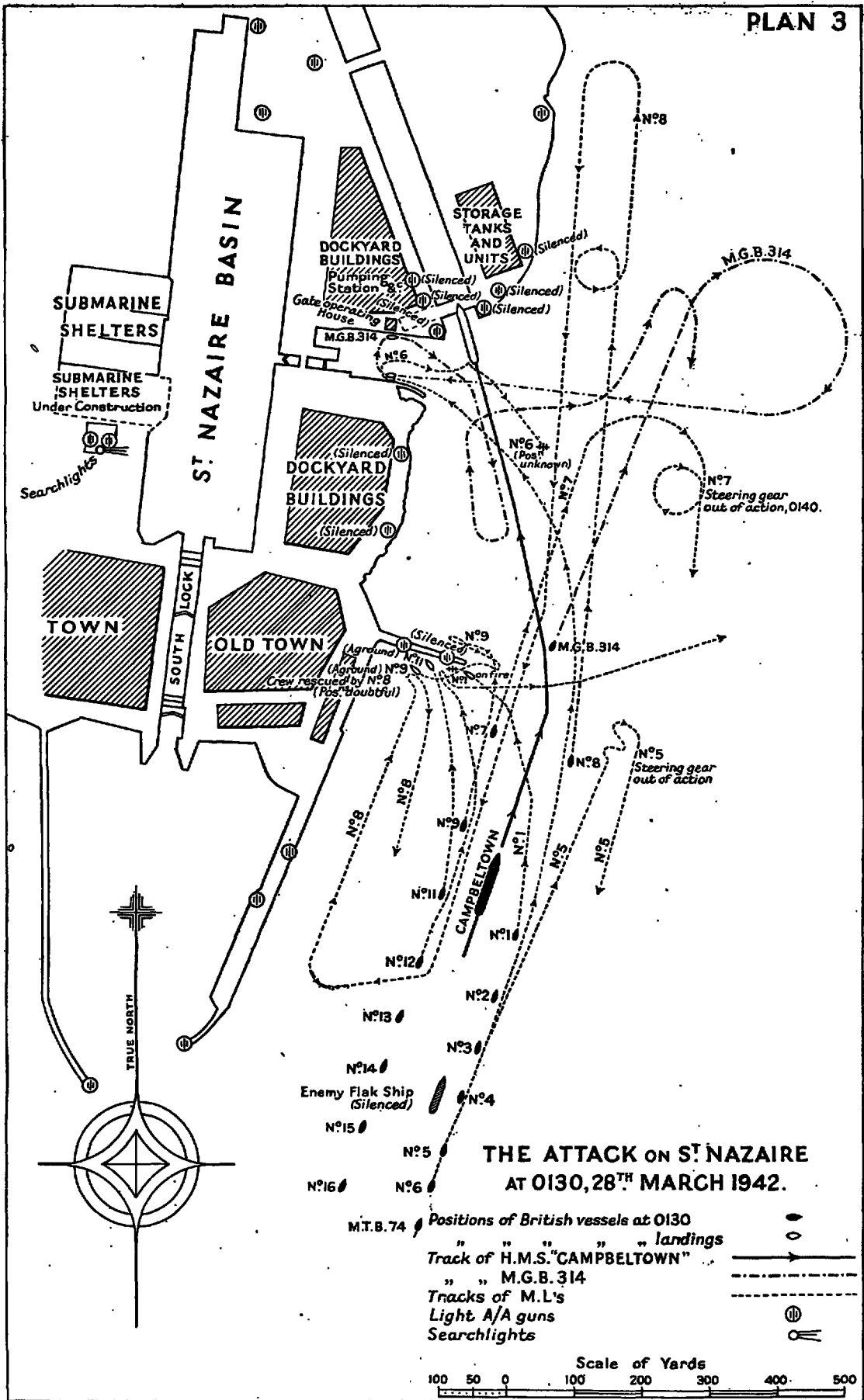
34. ATHERSTONE and TYNEDALE had with them two other M.L.s Nos. 446 and 156. As soon as all the wounded had been transferred I proceeded with these two, M.G.B.314 and M.L.270, transferring myself to ATHERSTONE.

35. At about 0745 a Heinkel 115 appeared and stayed with us for about 20 minutes—as soon as he had gone a Beaufighter made contact which considerably improved the situation. However, a quarter of an hour later a Junkers 88 arrived; he was at once attacked and rammed by the Beaufighter.

36. At 0906 H.M.S.s CLEVELAND and BROCKLESBY* joined and I placed my force under the command of H.M.S. CLEVELAND who was the senior officer present.

* *Admiralty footnote*: H.M.S.s CLEVELAND and BROCKLESBY were allocated as reinforcements for the return passage.





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