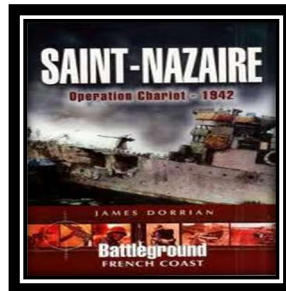


## THE RAID ON THE ST NAZAIRE DOCK

### 'OPERATION CHARIOT'

KNOWN IN MILITARY CHANNELS AS THE **"GREATEST RAID EVER"**

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In what some historians have called the original mission impossible, a small unit of Commandos achieved the unthinkable. On 28 March 1942, the British made a daring raid on the Normandie Dock at St. Nazaire in German-occupied France. The whys and hows of the Raid on St. Nazaire make this a heck of a story, but the fact that the plan was ultimately a success is the most incredible part of it all.

Hitler instituted his naval "Plan Z" in early 1939, calling for a massive augmentation of the Kriegsmarine for the sole purpose of being able to challenge the Royal Navy. U-boats were threatening Allied supply lanes from the United States to Britain; routes which if destroyed would render Britain unable to wage war. Since America's entrance into the fight just several weeks before, U-boats had crept inward toward the Eastern coast, wreaking havoc on merchant ships and sinking millions of tons of supplies.

In addition to the threat to Atlantic supply routes, the Allies had experienced repeated heavy losses in Asia with Japanese victories over Singapore & Malaya, and the evacuation of MacArthur from the Philippines. The United States was still reeling from the attack on Pearl Harbor and hadn't quite recovered enough to fully join the British in the fight. Churchill was desperate for a success. Aside from the knowledge of Hitler's cancellation of Operation Sealion—the planned invasion of Great Britain—there had been no good news for the Brits since the end of the Battle of Britain.



*The Tirpitz at Sea*

And perhaps the greatest naval threat of all, the German battleship Tirpitz forced the Royal Navy on its toes, having to dedicate much of its fleet to the containment of the Tirpitz in Norwegian waters where it was bullying merchant convoys to the Soviet ports of Murmansk and Arkhangelsk. On several occasions, the Brits unsuccessfully tried to lure Tirpitz into a fight in the hopes of knocking her out preemptively. When that strategy failed, there was one alternate course left: to destroy the Normandie Dock at St. Nazaire—the only Atlantic dock large enough to hold the 45,500-ton Tirpitz for repairs and maintenance. In so doing, the Kriegsmarine wouldn't be able to risk sending Tirpitz into the Atlantic without the availability of a dock.

The plan, known as Operation Chariot, was instituted by Lord Louis Mountbatten in late January 1942. He was not the first to suggest targeting St. Nazaire, but the idea had been repeatedly shot down by military brass who believed it impossible and therefore a waste of time and resources. Mountbatten, however, believed that "It's the fact that it is regarded as impossible that makes it possible; the Germans will never think we'll attempt it."

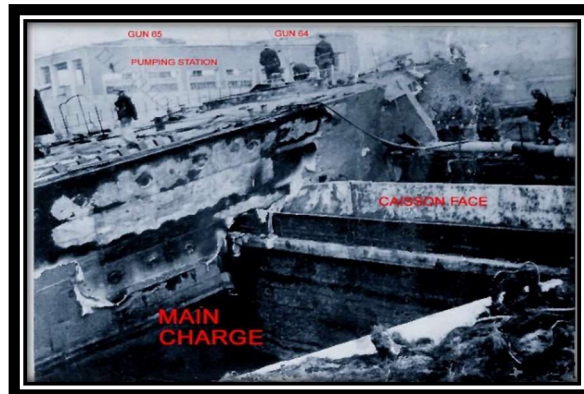
The job was given to the Commandos, a unit less than two years old, disliked by much of the regular military who saw their independence as a lack of discipline, and who resented that the best of the regular army units were recruited for Commando units. Nevertheless, Commandos received unique and specialized training meant to give them supreme confidence, the ability to fight independently, and first and foremost to conduct small-scale offensive raids in occupied territory. The group and its tactics were a favorite of Churchill's.



*HMS Campbeltown was converted for the raid. There are twin lines of armor plate down each side of the ship and the Oerlikon mountings. Two of her funnels have been removed, with the remaining two cut at an angle*

British intelligence on the topography and layout of the dock facilities was vast, including aerial reconnaissance photos and even detailed renderings of the interior and underground elements of the dock area. **In just nine days, the HMS Campbeltown (previously an American WWI-era destroyer known as the USS Buchanan) was metamorphosed to resemble a German destroyer.** The idea was that a task force of a few hundred Royal Navy personnel and British Commandos would slither into the Loire Estuary on the incognito Campbeltown flying the German naval ensign, complete with a captured code book enabling the communication of their supposed friendliness to the Germans. The Campbeltown, stuffed with several tons of the explosive Amatol, was to ram into the 1,500-ton gate of the Normandie dock and blow it to bits. The pump station which controlled the rise and fall of the dry dock's water, and the winding houses which controlled the opening and closing of the caissons or "doors" of the dock were also targeted for destruction. Despite being well-prepared, the raid didn't go exactly as planned. The Commandos, however, were prepared for the unexpected. Late on 27 March, Royal Air Forces bombers were supposed to serve as decoys, bombing random but clear targets to the east of the dock to detract from the German forces guarding the coast in 80 or so gun emplacements.

Since it was a cloudy night, however, the bombers dropped far fewer bombs than intended for fear of harming French civilians. **So instead they hovered suspiciously over the area, alerting the Germans that something wasn't quite right.** Though the Campbeltown was initially surprisingly successful at entering the estuary at around 0100 hours on the morning of 28 March, the bizarre behavior of the bombers gave them away. The Campbeltown was now under fire from German coastal and railway guns. Swapping out the German ensign for the White Ensign of the Royal Navy, **the Campbeltown rammed the dock gate just a few minutes behind schedule, though her bombs would prove to be several hours tardy.**



The above picture shows Campbeltown sitting on top of the gate after the ramming. The Commando's had left the ship and were fighting in the streets of St Nazaire and the explosives (see picture below) had not yet detonated. Even though the Germans searched the ship they did not find the explosives onboard. Later when the ship exploded over 360 people were killed by the blast including both Germans and the Commandos.

The Commandoes disembarked from the beached destroyer, heading immediately to the secondary targets. The pump station and winding houses were successfully taken out. The surviving Commandos headed to a predesignated rally point where they were to board several mahogany Motor Launches that would transport them home. These small wooden boats were particularly vulnerable, and many of them were easily destroyed by German gunfire; fuel burned on the surface of the water



German troops were crawling all over the Campbeltown on the morning of the 28th, they did not guess that she was packed with explosives. Around 360 men died when she exploded at noon.



Some of the Commando's killed on the dock



Some were taken prisoner

**This left the remaining 120 or so wounded and exhausted Commandos to face 5,000 well-armed and alert Germans. By dawn, the fighting was over.** While the cost was high in terms of loss of manpower, all targets were successfully destroyed—the Campbeltown's explosives eventually destroying the main gate a few hours later than intended—rendering the Normandie Dock at St. Nazaire useless, and thereby keeping the Tirpitz out of the Battle of the Atlantic. The success was a huge morale boost for the Brits, as well as the French who were finally given a sense of hope.



**This is a picture of the Normandie dry dock in France (St Nazaire) showing the French Superliner Normandie in the dry dock before it was captured by the Nazis (The dry dock, not the ship). The gate shown in front of the ship is the gate that was destroyed by Operation Chariot. A more detailed picture below shows its massive size.**



The dock was opened again in 1948 and this shows a picture of the reinstalled gate which is very much the same one destroyed by Operation Chariot. You can tell by the waterlines how much of the gate was underwater when it was struck by the HMS CAMPBELTOWN.

## THE AFTERMATH

The explosion put the dry dock out of commission until the end of the war. The St Nazaire raid had been a success but at a cost.

Of the **622 men** of the Royal Navy and Commandos who took part in the raid, **only 228 men returned to England**. **Five escaped** overland via Spain and Gibraltar. **169 men were killed** (105 RN and 64 Commandos) and another **215 became prisoners of war** (106RN and 109 Commandos). They were first taken to La Baule and then sent to Stalag 133 at Rennes. The fallen British raiders were buried at the Escoublac-la-Baule cemetery with military honors. The cemetery is located 13 kilometers west of St Nazaire.



*The graves of those commandos and sailors killed in the 'Greatest Raid'*

To recognize their achievement, **89 decorations were awarded for the raid**. This total includes the five Victoria Crosses awarded to Lieutenant Commander Beattie, Lieutenant Colonel Newman, and Commander Ryder and posthumous awards to Sergeant Durrant and Able Seaman Savage. Other decorations awarded were four Distinguished Service Orders, four Conspicuous Gallantry Medals, five Distinguished Conduct Medals, 17 Distinguished Service Crosses, 11 Military Crosses, 24 Distinguished Service Medals and 15 Military Medals. Four men were awarded the Croix de Guerre by France, and another 51 were mentioned in dispatches.

Adolf Hitler was furious that the British had been able to sail a flotilla of ships up the Loire unhindered. His immediate reaction was to dismiss Generaloberst Carl Hilpert, chief-of-staff to the Commander in Chief West. The raid refocused German attention on the Atlantic Wall, and special attention was given to ports to prevent any repeat of the raid. By June 1942 the Germans began using concrete to fortify gun emplacements and bunkers in quantities previously only used in U-boat pens. Hitler laid out new plans in a meeting with Armaments Minister Albert Speer in August 1942, calling for the construction of 15,000 bunkers by May 1943 to defend the Atlantic coast from Norway to Spain.

**The battleship Tirpitz never entered the Atlantic. She remained in Norwegian fjords to threaten Allied shipping until she was destroyed by the RAF on 12 November 1944.**





*St Nazaire was one of the 38 battle honors presented to the Commandos after the war. The raid has since been called The Greatest Raid of All. The survivors formed their association, the St Nazaire Society, which is a registered charity in the United Kingdom*

A memorial (see above) to the raid erected in Falmouth bears the following inscription.

#### OPERATION CHARIOT

FROM THIS HARBOUR 622 SAILORS  
AND COMMANDOS SET SAIL FOR  
THE SUCCESSFUL RAID ON ST. NAZAIRE  
28th MARCH 1942 168 WERE KILLED  
5 VICTORIA CROSSES WERE AWARDED

— . —  
DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF  
THEIR COMRADES BY  
THE ST. NAZAIRE SOCIETY

A new HMS Campbelltown, a Type 22 Frigate, was launched on 7 October 1987. She carried the ship's bell from the first Campbelltown which was rescued during the raid and had been presented to the town of Campbelltown, Pennsylvania at the end of the Second World War. In 1988 the people of Campbelltown voted to lend the bell to the new ship for as long as she remained in Royal Navy service. The bell was returned to the town on 21 June 2011 when HMS Campbelltown was decommissioned.



*On 4 September 2002, a tree and seat at the National Memorial Arboretum were dedicated to the men of the raid. The seat bears the inscription:*

In memory of the Royal Navy Sailors and Army Commandos killed in the raid on St Nazaire on 28 March 1942

#### THE LAST SURVIVOR OF THE RAID PASSES AWAY

**Sunday, 6 February 2011**

**'CROSSING THE BAR'**

I received the very sad news this weekend that Frank Edgar Pritchard had passed away, in Derriford Hospital, Plymouth, on January 29th.

Frank, at the time of the raid, had been a Leading Stoker, and a mere 22 years old. He survived the assault on the ship and returned to the UK on board Motor Gunboat 314.

Frank was a primary source for me when writing my first book on the raid. It is fair to say that without his contribution to the text the story of those who struggled, first to keep the old ship's engines running, and then to assist in her scuttling, might have been lost to history. I last met him in Falmouth at the time of the rededication of the Chariot memorial. He is shown below, with his wife Irene, outside the Falmouth Town Hall.



#### DOCUMENTARIES AND DRAMATIZATIONS

A fictionalized version of the raid was the climax of the 1952 British war film, *Gift Horse*. The film follows the career of an ex-US Navy destroyer, HMS Ballantrae (actually HMS Leamington); the raid is named "Operation Boadicea" and portrays the main events of the actual battle.

The war film *Attack on the Iron Coast* was released in 1968 and was a highly fictionalized version of the raid.

In 2007, Jeremy Clarkson presented the story of the raid in a BBC documentary entitled *The Greatest Raid of All Time*.

#### **DISCLAIMER**

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FROM WEBSITES/SOURCES THAT APPEAR TO BE AUTHENTIC, I CAN NOT ENSURE THAT ALL THE  
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