

MOTOR GUN BOAT 81

When German E-Boats began to run amok in English waters early in the Second World War, the Navy responded with a typically British solution

WORDS: Hugo Andrae Photos: Berthon and Paul Wyeth

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By the summer of 1940 Britain was under siege. Its army hastily evacuated from Dunkirk, its cities under attack from the Luftwaffe and its navy struggling to keep supply lines open, it seemed only a matter of time before a full scale invasion took place. Were it not for the skill of the RAF pilots and the technical superiority of the Spitfires they flew during the summer-long Battle of Britain, things could have turned out very differently.

But while the airforce retained its dominance of the skies, all was not well at sea. Cut off from occupied Europe, the convoys on which the country now depended were suffering heavy losses.



An early photograph of the Motor Gun Boat fleet that was built to take on the German E-Boat threat

German E-Boats were running amok in the Channel, creeping up on shipping, unleashing their torpedoes then disappearing into the night like wolves preying on defenceless sheep. Even when the E-Boats were spotted, conventional Navy craft were too slow to reach the scene before they melted away. What Britain needed was something fast, light and agile — a Spitfire of the seas.

Hubert Scott-Paine, a former powerboat racer and founder of the British Powerboat Company (BPB), was convinced he had the answer in the shape of a 72ft planing gun boat. Built out of wood and powered by triple 1,250hp petrol engines, giving it a top speed of more than 40 knots, it would be able to intercept and sink marauding E-Boats far more effectively than cumbersome steel ships.

The Admiralty bought into the idea and in November 1940 put in an initial order for 24 of these Motor Gun Boats (MGB) from BPB in January 1941.

MGB 81 is the last of the BPB boats still in working order and thanks to a government Libor grant (funded by fines levied ▶



on the banks), it has just undergone a major refit at Berthon's boatyard in Lymington. In a few week's time it will go on display at the Historic Dockyard in Portsmouth where it will form the centrepiece of a new memorial flotilla that will travel around the UK and Europe commemorating servicemen who fought in 20th Century naval conflicts. But before it leaves Lymington, its owners, the Portsmouth Naval Base Property Trust, have agreed to let us sea trial her for our traditional New Year boat test of something outside our usual fare.

ALL IN THE FRAME

Inevitably the allotted day of our trial dawns cold and drizzly. A stiff easterly breeze has kicked up a nasty chop in the Solent and the faces of our hastily assembled crew are as glum as the dark clouds overhead. Diggory Rose, MGB 81's regular skipper, isn't even sure we'll be able to go out unless conditions improve. Prior to her refit, MGB 81 had started to flex in heavy seas and nobody has yet put her newly rebuilt hull to the test. Much like an aircraft of the same era it comprises a relatively light skin (double diagonal half-inch thick mahogany planking above the waterline and triple beneath it) bent over a framework of rock

elm and spruce. Not only had the majority of these frames failed but at some point the main longitudinal beams had been cut at the central bulkhead, allowing the whole boat to flex in the middle. Berthon's solution was to remove, template and laminate a complete new set of frames (using an original 1940s power driver to screw them back into place) and replace the beams with a properly scarfed join in the middle. It also installed three brand new

825hp FPT diesel engines in place of the larger, heavier MTUs fitted some 15 years previously.

AT THE HELM

A break in the clouds gives Diggory the reassurance needed to put to sea, firing up the engines one by one until all six exhausts are disgorging a thick stream of cooling water and hot diesel fumes into the cold November air. In the 1940s, two 'stokers' would have been on duty in the engineroom, crammed in among the hot Packard V12s and V-drive gearboxes, relaying gear and throttle commands from the bridge. Today, triple racing-style levers on either side of the helm operate the gears and throttles respectively. Diggory juggles them as delicately as their stiff mechanisms allow, easing us out past the Isle of Wight ferry and into the Solent where he passes over the helm to me.

Even having observed Diggory in action, I'm amazed by the sheer physicality of the experience. The helm is outrageously heavy by modern standards with less than a single turn lock-to-lock, and pulling all three gear levers back into neutral takes both hands and most of my bodyweight. The throttles are lighter but not by much so it's with some trepidation that I shove the engines into gear and stir them into action. It takes a moment for the turbos to spin up but when the boost kicks in, MGB 81 picks up her skirts and starts to charge across the Solent, trampling the waves into submission. Any concerns that her 77-year-old bones may not be up to the task are expelled as quickly as the clouds of white spray streaming off her stern. The torquey FPT engines maintain a steady cruise of 25-28 knots at 150lph per engine, but they start to run out of puff at 30 knots. To be honest I'm quite grateful that she'll no longer reach 40 knots because even at 30 knots she's quite a handful. ▶



Two-pounder forward gun with Orlikon cannon (inset)



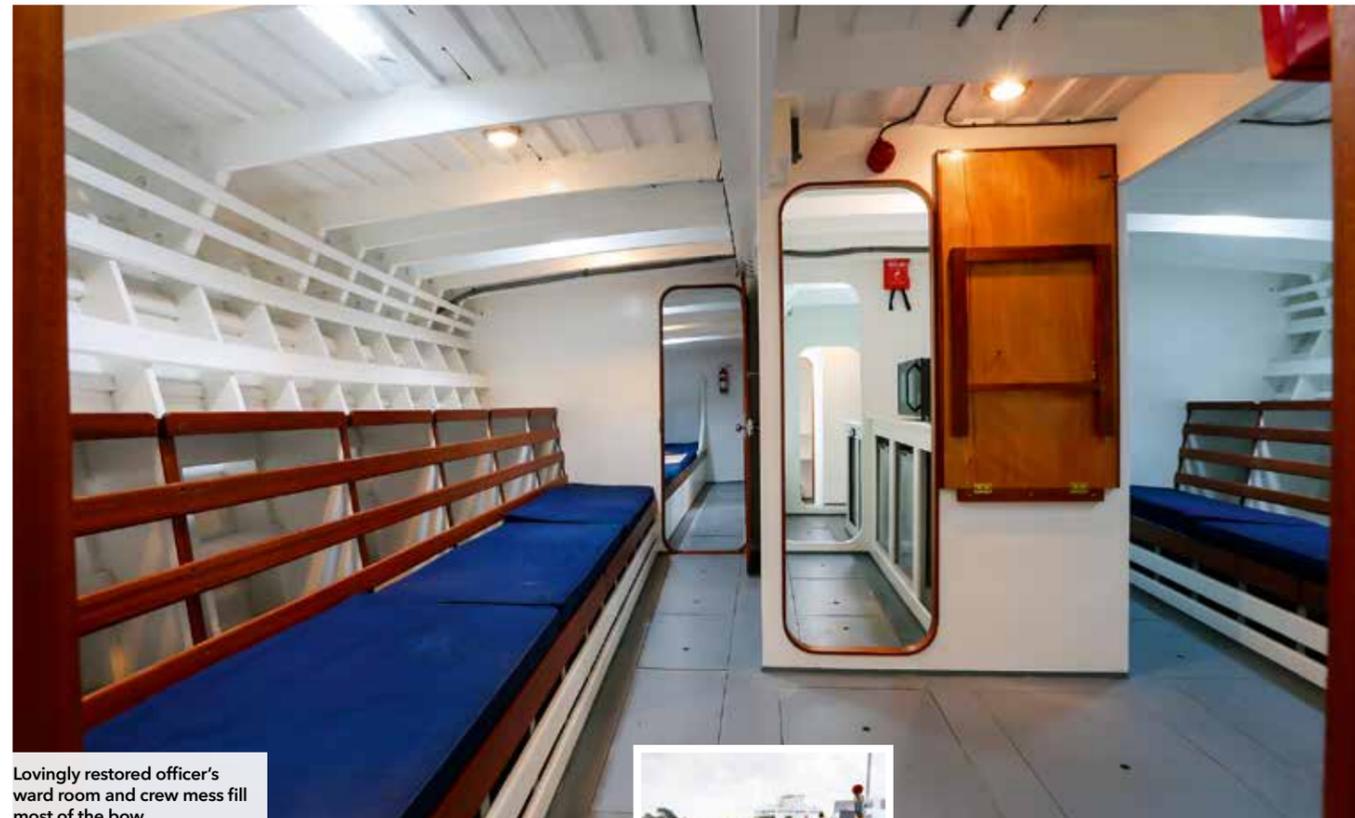
Comprehensive refit at Berthon's in Lymington



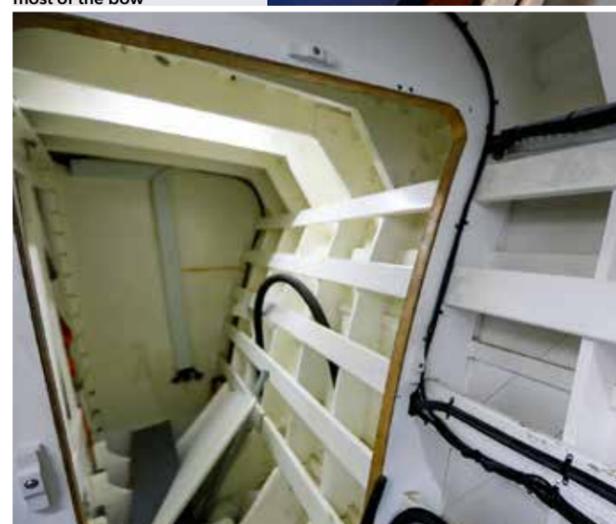
New laminated timber frames were made-up to prevent



Three new FPT diesels replaced the previous MTUs



Lovingly restored officer's ward room and crew mess fill most of the bow



Only one inch of mahogany planking separated crew from



Down the hatch (inset) and storage space for ordnance



Internal framework of rock elm and spruce exposed next to basic no-frills heads



The centre engine is sited further forward on a straight shaft while the outside pair run



She is every inch as distinctive and elegant as a Spitfire

A heave down on the thin stainless steel rim of the wheel sends her barreling into a long, arcing turn. At full speed the turning circle is measured in hundreds rather than tens of metres and in the narrow gap between Hurst Castle and the Isle of Wight we're in danger of running out of space. A modern 70ft sportscruiser would run rings around it but agile is clearly a relative concept when compared to the lumbering turn of a Destroyer. What she is, however, is remarkably graceful — for a machine of war MGB 81 is eerily beautiful. With her tall, beamy, flared bow tapering back to a long, low, narrow stern and a teardrop-shaped wheelhouse she is every inch as distinctive and elegant as a Spitfire. Is that simply form following function or did Hubert Scott-Paine and his designer George Selman set out to create something that was as aesthetically pleasing as it was lethal?

Crawling along the narrow corridor that leads aft from the tiny enclosed navigator's space to the small radar room and even more cramped ammunition store beneath the rear Oerlikon gun, I'm inclined to think the latter. Things are a little more spacious down below where the officer's ward room and crew mess fill most of the bow section but it's all pretty basic. Sitting alone down here, I can't help contemplating what it must have felt like on a cold December night with enemy gunfire raking overhead and only an inch of mahogany planking separating white hot rounds from you and the 2,700 gallons of petrol stored a few feet away. There's still a steel repair plate hastily

bolted to the inside of the hull where a round pierced her topsides. It's poignant reminders like this that linger in the memory long after the initial thrill of helming her has subsided.

A FEW BRAVE MEN

Nor will I ever forget the words of former wartime skipper Cameron Gough, who was spoke to me for another article back in 2004. He was 21 when he commanded MGB 81 during the D-Day landings. "One didn't really realise it was frightening at the time. It was something we were told to do, so we got on and did it," Cameron told me. "I lost my forward gunner to a lucky shot during a spasmodic encounter with an enemy vessel and didn't even realise he'd been hit until some time later."

Wherever that gunner is now and the thousands like him who fought and died for their country, it is our duty to ensure their sacrifice is never forgotten. Keeping craft like MGB 81 afloat is a fitting way to remember them.

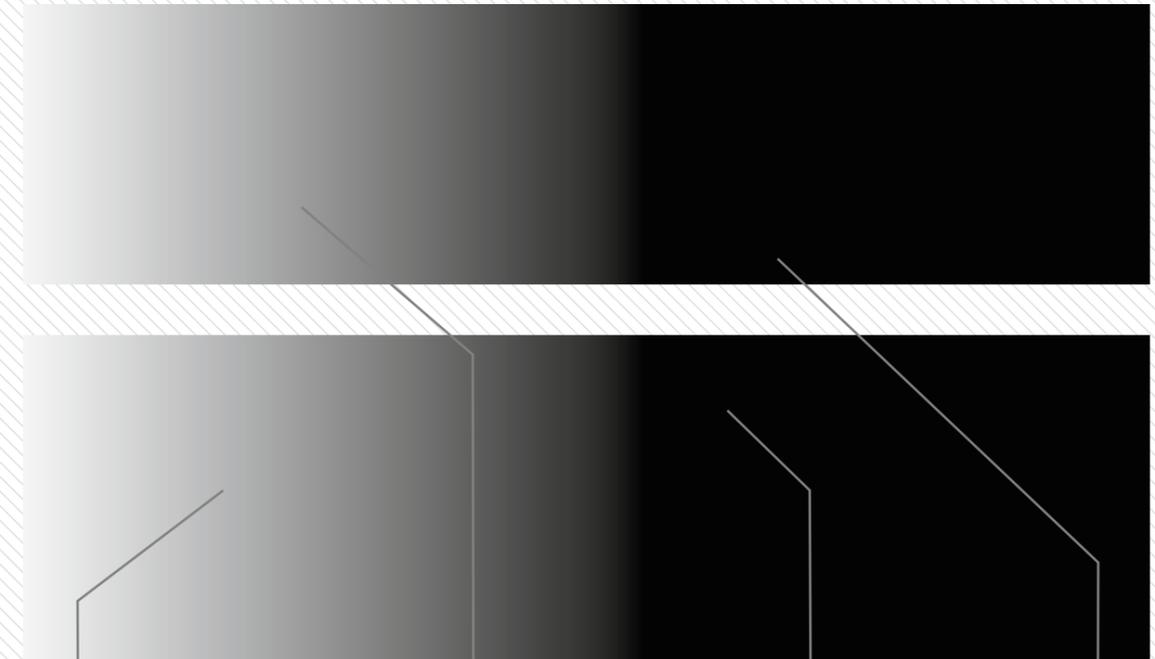
CONTACT: www.pnbpropertytrust.org



NAVIGATOR'S SPACE
The small enclosed space in front of helm is where the navigator

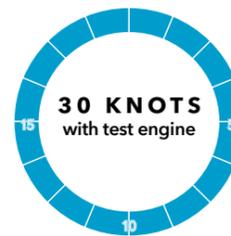
CONTROLS
The gears to the left of the helm and throttles to the right are very heavy to

HELM
The wheel is an equally muscular operation, with less than a full turn

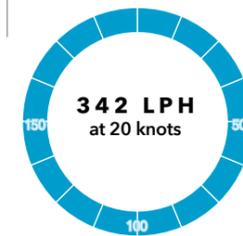


POSITION
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TOP SPEED



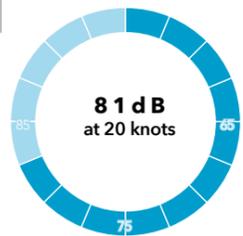
CONSUMPTION



RANGE



NOISE



PRICE



SPECIFICATION

LOA 71ft 9in (21.87m)
Beam 20ft 7in (6.27m)
Draught 5ft 9in (1.1m)
Displacement 46.6 tonnes
Fuel capacity 3,000 litres
Designer George Selman and Bill Holt
Built by British Power Boat Company
Date of build 1942

COSTS & OPTIONS

Price from Irreplaceable
Forward gun Single 2-pounder
Aft gun 20mm Oerlikon cannon
Side guns Twin .303 Lewis guns
Depth charges 2 x Mark VII
Smoke screen 1

PERFORMANCE

Test engines FPT C13 12.9 litres, 6 cylinder, 825hp @ 2,400rpm

		ECO	1,250	1,500	1,750	FAST 2,000	2,250	MAX 2,400
RPM	500	1,000	1,250	1,500	1,750	2,000	2,250	2,400
SPEED	7.2	10.3	13.6	17.5	20.9	24.5	27.8	30.0
LPH	n/a	105	183	282	351	423	462	495
LPM	n/a	10.2	13.5	16.1	16.8	17.3	16.6	16.5
RANGE	n/a	294	222	186	178	173	181	182
NOISE	n/a	79	80	81	81	82	82	82

Speed in knots. Fuel figures based on manufacturer's ideal propeller curves not live sea trial recordings. 30% fuel, 50% water, 8 crew + safety stores. 4 degrees air temperature