

Naval Actions of the Russian Civil War

Part 1

By Simon Stokes

Introduction

The military intervention in Russia by the Allies at the end of the Great War was as complex and confusing an affair for the participants at the time as it is today for those who attempt to make sense of it. This is largely because so many different national forces and interests were involved in what started as a limited military operation with limited aims and became a substantial assault on the fledgling Bolshevik state – as clear an example of scope creep as ever there has been. This complexity and the fact that the events happened so close to the end of the Great War has meant that the conflict has been largely overlooked in the west. This is a pity, especially from the point of view of the naval wargamer, as there is a rich and varied vein of naval actions that took place during the conflict. In part one of this article I'll recount those naval actions and in part two I'll expand upon some of those actions that lend themselves as scenarios for the naval wargamer.

Historical Background

Following the abdication of Tsar Nicholas II in March 1917 and the formation of a provisional democratic government in Russia, U.S. President Woodrow Wilson's final reservations about entering the war with an ally that was led by a tyrannical monarch no longer existed. Thus, the U.S. joined the war against the Central Powers while the Russian provisional government, led by Alexander Kerensky, pledged to continue fighting the Germans on the Eastern Front. In return, the allies began providing economic and technical support to the Russian provisional government so they could carry out their military pledge.

The Russian Army proved no match for the German and Austro-Hungarian forces on the Eastern Front however and the demoralised Russian Army, plagued by mutinies and desertions, melted away and the Eastern Front quickly collapsed. Only the Czechoslovak Legion, a corps of 50,000 ethnic Slavs who had reluctantly fought with the Central Powers and subsequently switched sides after being captured by the Russian Army, remained an effective fighting force. Allied war material still in transit quickly began piling up in the already well-stocked warehouses of Archangel and the ice-free port of Murmansk.

In October 1917, the October Revolution overthrew Kerensky's provisional government and five months later, the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic signed the treaty of Brest-Litovsk with the Germans, which formally ended the war on the Eastern Front. This allowed the Germans to begin redeploying troops to the Western Front where the depleted British and French armies had not yet been bolstered by the American Expeditionary Force. In April 1918, a division of German troops also landed in Finland, creating fears that they might try to capture the Murmansk-Petrograd railroad, the strategic port of Murmansk and possibly even the city of Archangel with its vast stockpiles of allied armaments.

Faced with this series of events, the leaders of the British and French governments decided that the Allies needed to begin a military intervention in North Russia. They hoped to achieve three major objectives:

1. Prevent the Allied war material stockpiles in Archangel from falling into German or Bolshevik hands.
2. Mount an offensive to rescue the Czechoslovak Legion, which was stranded along the Trans-Siberian Railroad.
3. Resurrect the Eastern Front by defeating the Bolshevik army with the assistance of the Czech Legion and an expanded anti-Bolshevist force and in the process stop the spread of communism and the Bolshevik cause in Russia.

Severely short of spare troops to send, the British and French decided to request that President Wilson provide U.S. troops for the North Russia Campaign and the Siberian Campaign. In July 1918 5,000 U.S. troops were hastily organised as the American North Russia Expeditionary Force (also known as the Polar Bear Expedition) and sent to Archangel. 8,000 U.S. troops were similarly organised as the American Expeditionary Force Siberia and sent to Vladivostok. That same month the Canadian

government agreed to a British request to command and furnish the majority of troops for a combined British Empire force.

Japan sent by far the most numerous organised force to the Siberian front, but had it's own territorial reasons for participating in the intervention, coupled with an intense hostility to communism which it saw as a potential threat to its monarchy. Consequently there was little co-operation between Japan and the other allies.

When the Armistice came into force in November 1918 there were already substantial forces in Russia fighting the Bolsheviks.



MAP SHOWING APPROXIMATE POSITIONS OF BOLSHEVIST AND ANTI-BOLSHEVIST FORCES ON ALL THE FIGHTING FRONTS IN RUSSIA, (MARCH, 1919)

The Baltic

After the armistice, the Baltic states of Estonia, Finland, Latvia and Lithuania declared their independence from both Germany and Russia. The allies were quick to recognise the newly independent states, but slower to give them any material aid. Eventually a naval force under command of rear admiral Alexander-Sinclair, comprising 6th light cruiser squadron (*Cardiff* [F], *Calypso*, *Caradoc*, *Ceres*, *Cassandra*), a flotilla of 7 modern V&W class destroyers and supporting minesweepers and auxiliary cargo vessels loaded with munitions was despatched with orders to “show the flag and support British policy as circumstances may dictate”.



HMS Calypso

The main worry for Alexander-Sinclair's small force was the Bolshevik Baltic fleet at Kronstadt. In 1919 the Russian naval base of Kronstadt was probably the best protected fleet base in the world. It lay on the southern side of Kotlin island at the narrow eastern extremity of the Gulf of Finland. Behind the defences lay the Bolshevik Baltic Fleet, at the time known to include a dreadnought (*Petropavlovsk*), a pre-dreadnought (*Andrei Pervozvanny*), an armoured cruiser (*Oleg*), 6 heavy destroyers (*Gavrill*, *Azard*, *Konstantin*, *Svoboda*, *Spartak*, *Avtroil*) and 4 light destroyers (*Vsadnik*, *Gaidamak*, *Amuretz*, *Ussurietz*) besides a flotilla of between 3 and 7 submarines and numerous patrol craft. There was also a seaplane base nearby.



Petropavlovsk

Only days into its mission, on 5th Dec 1918, Alexander-Sinclair's force lost the cruiser *Cassandra* to a mine, a hazard very common in the shallow mine strewn waters of the immediate post Great War Baltic. The force was soon in action however, providing significant shore bombardment support for the Estonians in cutting the Russian Bolshevik forces supply lines by destroying a bridge which connected the Reds with Petrograd and forcing their retirement.

Risking leaving only part of his flotilla (*Calypso*, *Caradoc*, *Vendetta*, *Vortigen* and *Wakeful* under Capt Bertram Thesiger) in support of the Estonians, Alexander-Sinclair took the remainder down to Riga to encourage the Latvians. The Bolsheviks meanwhile decided that something needed to be done about the British force, as they saw it, meddling in their affairs, and ordered a force under the Soviet Naval Commissar K.K.Raskolinikov to sortie from Kronstadt to destroy the British flotilla. Due to the chaotic nature of the Bolshevik command structure, ill discipline among the sailors and poor maintenance of the ships only two destroyers, both large modern Novik class units (*Spartak*, *Avtroil*), got as far as Reval. One ran aground when the British opened fire, quickly hoisting the white flag. The other was surrounded as it attempted to retreat back to Kronstadt and also surrendered to Capt Thesiger's force. K.K.Raskolinikov was found hiding behind a sack of potatoes! Both of the captured Russian destroyers were handed over to the Estonians and formed the nucleus of their fledgling navy being renamed *Wambola* and *Lennuk* respectively.

At Riga the Latvian situation was even more desperate and Alexander-Sinclair was begged to put his ships' crews ashore to support the government as the Bolsheviks already held large tracts of the country and threatened to take Riga as well. The situation was complicated further by the large force of German troops in Latvia which were not presently fighting anyone. The German High Commissioner was trying to induce the Latvian Prime minister to grant citizenship to them as a pre condition to them becoming involved in the fight against the Bolsheviks. This would put Germany in an ideal situation to exert its control over Latvia. The prime minister declined. Alexander-Sinclair lent what support he could with ship to shore bombardment and when the Bolsheviks closed in on Riga, embarked some of Riga's prominent citizens and transported them to the relative safety of west Latvia. Riga fell to the Bolsheviks in early January.

Not long after this, the admiralty decided to send out the 1st Light Cruiser Squadron (*Inconstant*, *Galatea*, *Phaeton*, *Royalist*, *Caledon* [F]), together with accompanying destroyers, under the command of Rear Admiral Sir Walter Cowan as replacement for Alexander-Sinclair's force. The Bolshevik Baltic fleet was of a size and strength which could, if it were handled with skill and resolution, brush aside Cowan's force should it choose to emerge from the security of its base. Cowan however adopted a more aggressive posture towards his opponents and as the ice began to clear from the Gulf of Finland in the late northern Spring, moved his base first to Reval and then into Biorko Sound, off the island of Selskar and only 30 miles from Kronstadt where activity in the Russian base could be closely monitored.

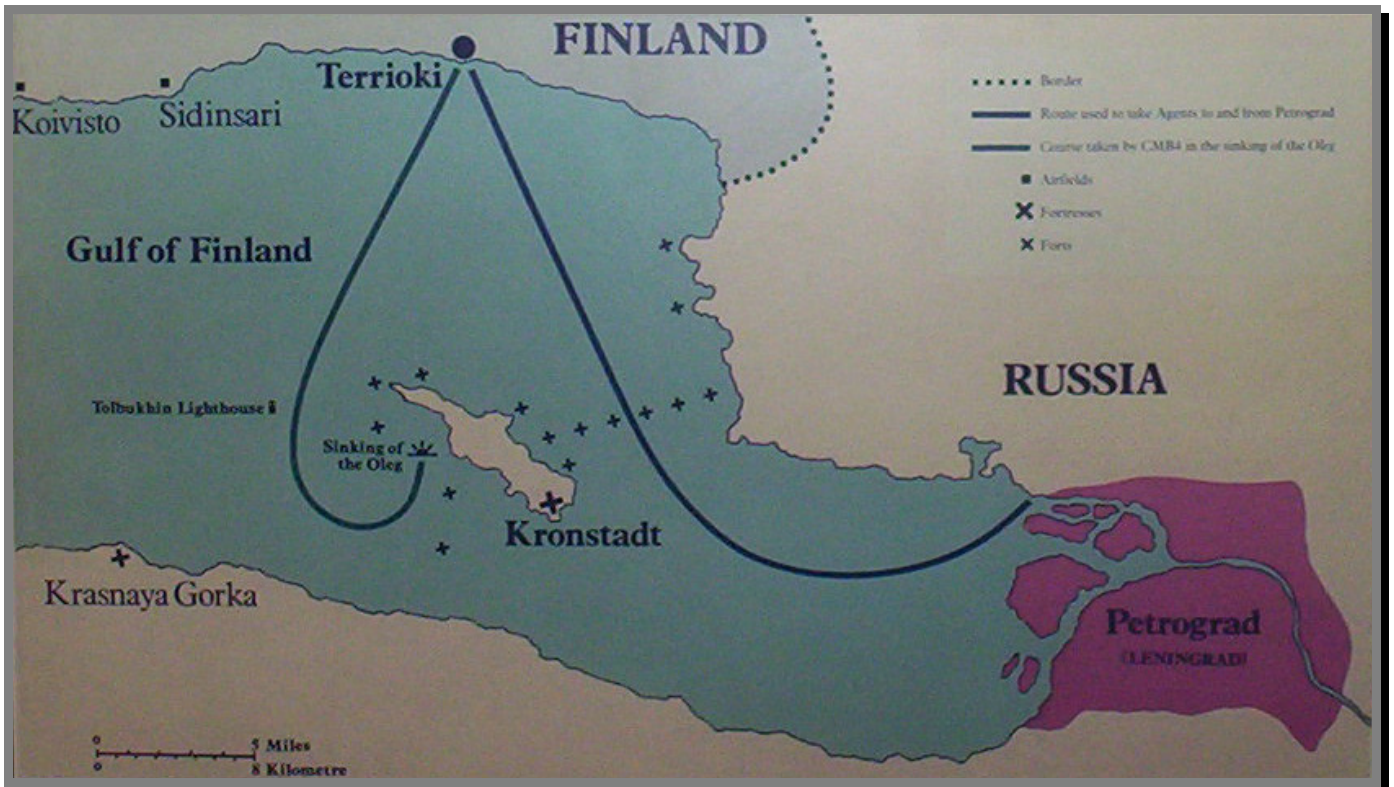
On 17th May the Bolsheviks tried a reconnaissance in strength in which a heavy destroyer led four other vessels out of the base. The recce was covered by *Petropavlovsk* and *Oleg* which also slipped out of harbour and past the defences. The destroyer exchanged fire with the British forces who moved forward to the edge of the minefield. The Russian destroyer was hit and slowed to a few knots, but managed to turn herself about and headed back to harbour. Cowan pursued as far as he dared and eventually broke off the chase when he came in range of Kronstadt's defensive forts, some of which mounted 12" guns.

Clearly there was something of a stand-off developing, the breaking of which was to come from an unlikely source. Lieutenant Augustus Agar commanding a group of volunteer seamen and working in plain clothes, had been dispatched to the area by the head of the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) Mansfield Cumming (known simply as 'C') and were in possession of two recently developed weapons, 40' coastal motor boats (CMBs) made from plywood and with a hydroplane form hull capable of 45 knots they were referred to as skimmers and were capable of carrying a single 18" torpedo. His instructions were that he would be transported to the Baltic under the guise of 'civilian salesman' where he and his crews would set up a courier service between the Finnish coast and a British agent 'ST25' (Paul Dukes) in Petrograd. The principal 'courier' was an ex-officer in the Russian army, referred to as 'Peter'.



British 40' CMB underway

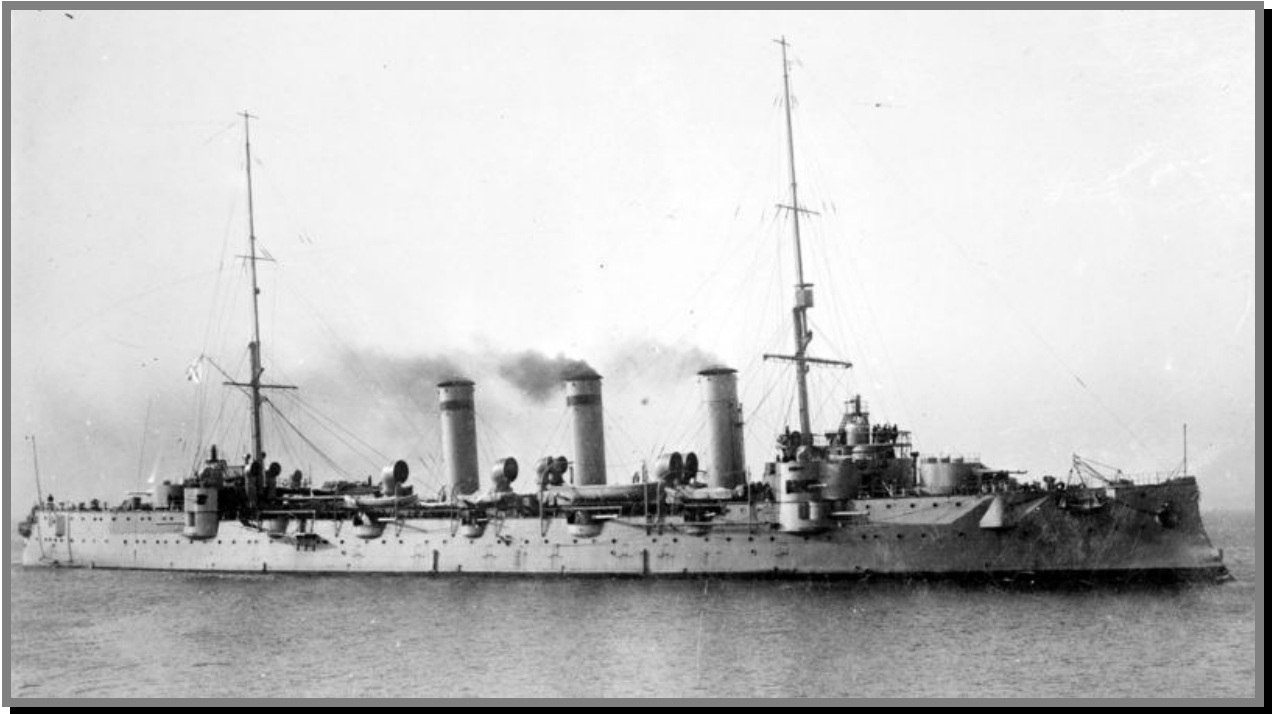
Agar had considered the defences at Kronstadt to see how best to insert and retrieve couriers. His conclusions led to a plan of spectacular audacity which perfectly exploited the characteristics of the CMB. He planned to take the couriers right to the outskirts of Petrograd itself by the most direct route possible i.e. through Kronstadt's seaward defences and up the river Neva. Relying on the cover of darkness and the skill of a local smuggler as pilot, his idea was to take one of his CMBs through the North channel's chain of forts, relying on the small size and shallow draft of his craft (they drew only 2'9") to evade the defenders and surmount the mine and submerged breakwater defences and its great speed to keep him out of trouble subsequently. The mines were set at a depth of 6' so were harmless, but the breakwaters were believed to be only 3' below the surface giving his boats a mere 3" clearance. Agar based his boats at a tiny Finish fishing village actually inside the minefield and only 15 miles from Kronstadt, where he could observe the Russian base from the local church tower.



It so happened that on the night of his first attempt to penetrate Kronstadt's defences, the important fortress of Krasnaya Gorka, which commanded the approaches to Kronstadt's southern channel, was in revolt and so distracted the defenders of the naval base from their primary task. The following day, safely back at his secret base with his mission completed, Agar watched helplessly as the Bolshevik battleships shelled the fortress that was now flying the white flag of opposition to the Soviets. The following day he repeated the trip, bringing the courier out to Finnish soil. On the return journey Agar could see the battleships again shelling the mutinous fort, and resolved to do something about it. Admiral Cowan had managed to obtain a single 18" torpedo for each of his two CMBs, and Gus Agar resolved to try to ambush the Russian battleships on the assumption that they would once again set out to bombard Krasnaya Gorka.

Agar assembled both his crews and told them of his decision, which was his alone. His boats were now armed with an 18" torpedo each and set out that very night, 16th June. They would wear their hidden naval uniforms in case of capture and fly the white ensign. Unfortunately on the approach, which was made with no lights and at high speed, *CMB 7* struck a floating object, breaking her propeller shaft. The mission had to be aborted and Agar in *CMB 4* towed the damaged boat back to base.

Agar determined to try again the following night with *CMB 4*. By this time the battleship's place in the bombardment force had been taken by the cruiser *Oleg*. *CMB 4* put to sea, with Sub-Lieutenant John Hampshire RNR and Chief Motor Mechanic Hugh Beeley RNVR accompanying Agar, in a short, choppy sea. As they reached the destroyer screen they suffered a mishap. To launch a torpedo a CMB ejected it from the stern – pushed out by a ram, itself impelled by a cordite cartridge: the boat just had to get out of the way before the torpedo motor fired. Until the point of ejection, it was held fast by 'stops'. While removing the safety pin from the cartridge, Hampshire accidentally fired it. Fortunately the stops were still in place and the 'fish' did not move. Reloading with a fresh cartridge was a tricky job in the dark and in a choppy sea. Hampshire was by now both seasick and in shock. Beeley saw this and 'deliberately and carefully' reloaded by himself. Agar said 'it felt like three hours but was probably about three minutes'.



Russian armoured cruiser Oleg

CMB 4 managed to approach to within 500 yards at high speed, dispatch the single torpedo and then race away under heavy fire from the escort destroyers. A large flash followed by a huge column of black smoke confirmed that the torpedo had found its mark and the *Oleg* capsized and sank in under 12 minutes so that the following morning her wreck was clearly visible in the shallow waters. Though Agar and his 2 crew members suffered no casualties, Hampsheir, besides being very seasick, was 'all in' from shock. The Admiral was 'more than pleased' and was sure the Russian ships would not venture out of their minefield now that one had been sunk and promised to stand by him whole-heartedly should there be 'any difficulty with the Foreign Office'. Agar was later awarded the Victoria Cross for his part in the action, though initially his name was withheld as the Bolsheviks had put a bounty on his head. Hampsheir received the Distinguished Service Cross and Beeley the Conspicuous Gallantry Medal. Realising the utility of the CMBs, Admiral Cowan requested more to be sent out from England to add to his force.



*Sub-Lieutenant John Hampsheir RNR, Lieutenant Augustus Agar, Chief Motor Mechanic Hugh Beeley RNVR
in a photograph taken immediately after the raid.*

As there were four weeks before he could do another courier run, Agar towed the damaged *CMB 7* to Bjorko, where he arranged for both boats to be repaired and refitted. By the third week in July, they

were back in Terrioki, making several courier runs, some by *CMB 7* commanded by Sub-Lieutenant Sindall, and some with a second courier a former prize fighter known as 'Geftor'. On one run Sindall was seen by the forts – possibly by going too fast and making a bow wave – and fired on, returning safely but without landing his courier.

On 14th August Gus made another attempt to collect Paul Dukes taking Hampshire and Beeley with him. They waited an hour at the rendezvous point but Dukes didn't show and so decided to head for home. At first Beeley had trouble starting the engine but eventually got it going. Then they were caught in a squall and started to ship water. Progress was reduced to a crawl as the crew frantically bailed for all they were worth. After half an hour the squall eased and they were able to turn for home. Following this further brush with a watery grave, Hampshire's nerves finally went and he was sent home as unfit for active service.

On 18th August 1919, Agar took *CMB 7* into Kronstadt once more, this time acting as guide to a flotilla of seven other larger 55' CMBs each of which carried two 18" torpedoes, as opposed to the 40' CMB's one. The attack was led by Commander Claude Dobson. His CMBs were split into two groups *CMB 79A* (Bremner), *CMB 31BD* (Dobson) and *CMB 88BD* ("Mossy" Dayrell-Reed) in group 1 and *CMB 62BD* (Brade), *CMB 86* (Howard) and *CMB 72* (Bodley) in group 2. *CMB 24A* (Napier) was to operate independently and had the specific task of taking out the Russian destroyer *Gavriil* which was guarding the harbour entrance.

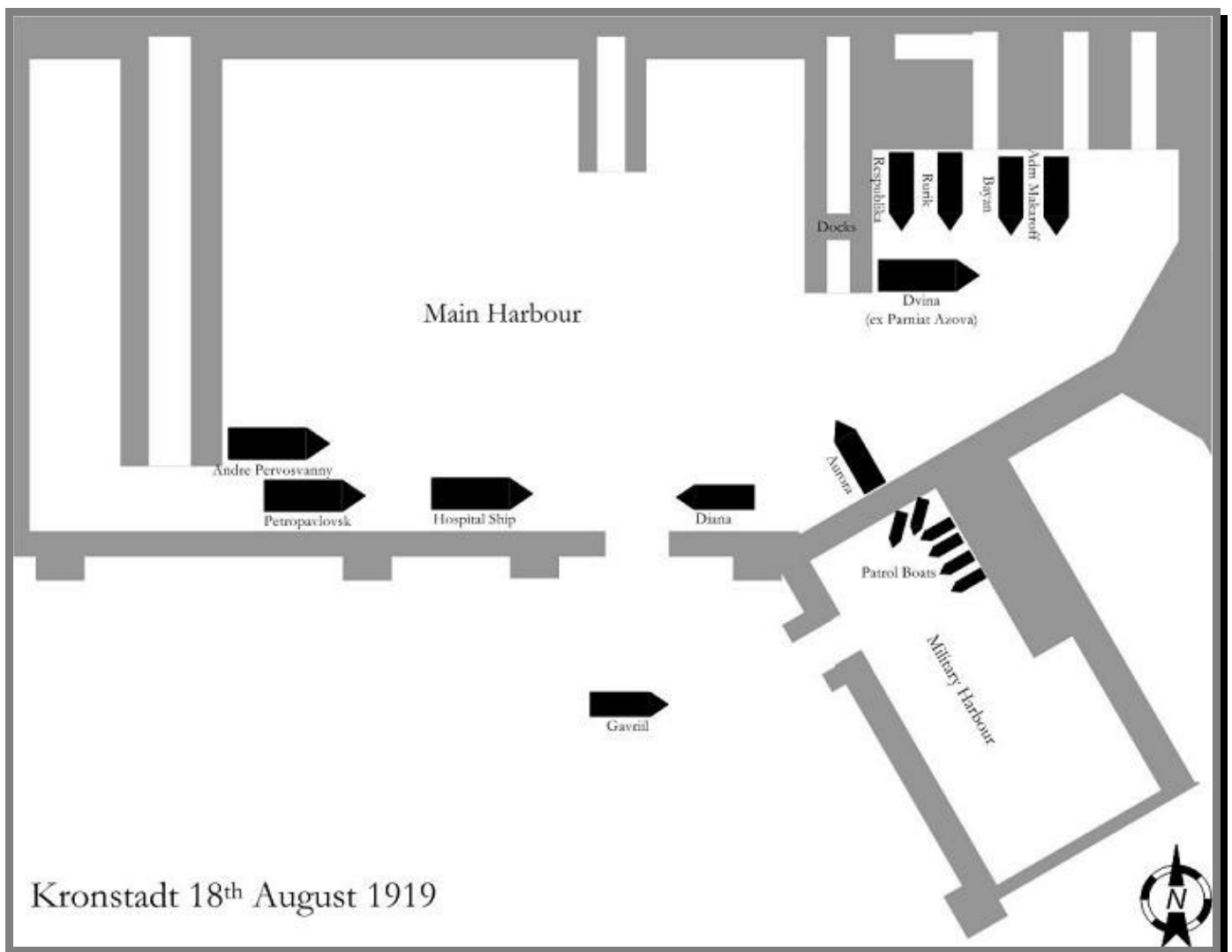


Model of a 55' CMB on display at IWM Duxford

Agar led them through the minefields and past the forts. Almost immediately things began to go wrong though. For some reason Dobson's pilot (Huva) urged him to head further south than the line Agar was taking, Dobson took his advice and *CMB 31BD* followed by *CMB 79A*, *CMB 88BD*, *CMB 62BD* and *CMB 72* veered away to the south. Sure that the noise of their engines would by now have been heard Agar increased speed to make the boats more difficult to hit. Just then the forts opened up on them with machine guns and light artillery. Luckily they were not hit and were soon able to ease off once they were out of range of the forts guns. *CMB 86* had however suffered an engine failure and was adrift

somewhere behind them and no-where to be seen. Dobson's group had in the meantime passed undetected over the breakwater and was now a full 5 minutes ahead of Agar's schedule. Puzzled why neither Agar or the expected diversionary air attack were anywhere to be seen Dobson resolved to press home the attack without them. CMB 79 passed unseen behind *Gavriil* and headed toward the narrow harbour entrance to destroy the boom or chain guarding the entrance using cotton charges that it carried specifically for that purpose, but there was no boom or chain – the harbour entrance was unguarded. Bremner couldn't believe his luck and CMB 79A surged forward into Kronstadt harbour and lined up on the 6,734 ton submarine depot ship *Dvina* (ex *Parniat Azova*), just as the bombing raid on the docks had belatedly begun, and launched his torpedo. CMB 79A turned sharply to port and a few moments later the torpedo struck the *Dvina* on the starboard beam. There was a tremendous explosion and she immediately started to heel over to starboard.

Meanwhile CMB 7 and CMB24A had arrived at the harbour entrance and Napier moved straight into his attack on the *Gavriil*. CMB24A came under heavy fire from shore batteries straight away, but Napier suddenly spotted another CMB crossing his course at speed and heading for the harbour entrance. Napier broke off the attack, put his boat into a wide turn and resumed his attack as soon as the boat had gone full circle. He lined up on the *Gavriil*, closed to within launch distance and had just released his torpedo when a near miss from *Gavriil's* main guns brought the boat to a stop, threw the crew off their feet and blew Napier over the side. Before they could recover, two more shells exploded either side of the boat the force of the explosions opening up a split down the entire length of the boat which simply fell apart and sank. Napier's torpedo either missed the *Gavriil* or malfunctioned as the destroyer was unharmed and now fully alert as to what was going on.



The boats heading for the harbour were CMB 31BD and CMB 88BD who's targets were the pre-dreadnought *Andrei Pervozvanny* and the dreadnought *Petropavlovsk* respectively. Dobson in CMB 31BD was the first to make his run. They entered the harbour at full throttle and immediately had to make a sharp turn to port in order to line up on the *Andrei Pervozvanny*. Every gun in the harbour

seemed to open up on them as they made their approach but they knew that they had to launch their torpedoes at high speed in the shallow waters of the harbour to avoid the torpedo striking the sea bed and so Dobson held his nerve till his boat reached 1000 rpm when he let fly with both his boats torpedoes and swung his boat sharply to port. Both torpedoes slammed into the side of the pre-dreadnought. *Petropavlovsk* was moored next to *Andrei Pervozvanny* so *CMB 88BD* followed almost in the tracks of *CMB 31BD* as it made its attack, however as they made the same sharp turn to port after entering the harbour Lieutenant "Mossy" Dayrell-Reed was hit in the head by a machine gun bullet and slumped over the wheel. Only quick action by second in command Lieutenant Gordon Steele brought the boat back on course. Steele managed to get both his torpedoes away but so close was he to the dreadnought that when the torpedoes struck, the boat was caught in the blast, though not seriously damaged. *CMB 88BD* narrowly avoided a collision with a barge as it continued its turn away and then headed back out to sea at full throttle. They had a brush with the *Gavriil* outside the harbour entrance and exchanged an unequal fire with her but soon outdistanced the Russian destroyer as they headed for home.

Gus Agar in *CMB 7* was watching events unfold from outside the harbour and was considering having a crack at the *Gavriil* with his one 18" torpedo, but activity in the military harbour made his mind up to stick with the original plan and he put *CMB 7* into a wide circle which brought him into line with the mouth of that harbour. He opened up to full speed and launched his 18" torpedo just before *CMB 7* reached the harbour entrance, swinging away at the last moment. The torpedo had been aimed at the most dense concentration of moored Bolshevik patrol boats and although he didn't see the torpedo strike he heard the explosion followed by several smaller secondary explosions. No Bolshevik patrol boats emerged from the military harbour.

The depleted second wave, *CMB 62* and *CMB 72*, now began their attack runs, but almost immediately ran into trouble. The air attack was by now almost exhausted so could do little to avert attention from the motor boats as they ran in, even though one plane targeted the *Gavriil* and strafed it from stem to stern in an attempt to draw its fire away from the CMBs. *CMB 72* was hit early on damaging a carburettor and jamming the torpedo launching gear. With no way to deliver his ordnance Bodley veered his boat away to starboard and headed for home. This left only Frank Brade in *CMB 62* to make the attack. He raced past *Gavriil* without being hit, but was caught in searchlights at the harbour mouth which temporarily blinded him and as he veered away to port *CMB 62* ran straight into *CMB 79* as it was limping out of the harbour, riding up over the top of it. Both boats were now locked together and stationary and drawing the fire of every Russian gun that could be trained on them. Brade was the first to regain his wits and quickly assessed the situation. *CMB 79* was clearly done for but the boats were jammed together, however Brade managed to force his bow around to face the open sea and slowly pushed both boats out the harbour entrance, though they were constantly being swept with machine gun fire, which killed three of the crew.

Once outside the harbour they managed to work *CMB 62* free and after transferring the crew of *CMB 79* and setting the cordite charges on the wrecked boat they headed for the open sea. *CMB 79* exploded with a tremendous roar as the charges set off her fuel tanks. *Gavriil* was now the only thing between them and safety, and she opened up a tremendous fire on the retreating motor boat. Brade though still had two torpedoes left and so lined up to make a run on the Russian destroyer. However no sooner had he lined up for the attack Brade was hit and Bremner, who had also already been hit, hauled himself forward to take the wheel from Brade's dying hands. Bremner pressed on with the attack and launched both torpedoes at a distance of only 200 yards, but to his annoyance he saw both torpedoes pass underneath the *Gavriil* and head out to sea. Bremner now attempted to make good his escape, but *Gavriil's* gunfire proved just as deadly as it had earlier in the attack and *CMB 62* was quickly bracketed and brought to a stop when a shell splinter wrecked her engine and killed chief motor mechanic Francis Thatcher. Bremner refused to surrender however and tried to buy time for Dunkley, his own motor mechanic, to breath some life into the engines. This was all to no avail though as a direct hit from *Gavriil's* main guns blew *CMB 62* apart. Bremner survived though and was taken prisoner. He had been wounded an astonishing 11 times during the action.

All the remaining boats, even *CMB 86*, eventually made it back to Biorco Sound, though they all had a pretty hot time of it getting back past the forts. In all the British lost 8 men killed with a further 9 taken prisoner. Dobson and Steele were awarded VCs. Agar, Bremner and Dayrell-Reed were awarded the DSO, though Dayrell-Reed's was awarded posthumously as he died not long after *CMB 88* arrived back at Biorco Sound. All the ratings received conspicuous Gallantry Medals. Admiral Sir Charles Madden, C1C of the Grand Fleet, described the attack as "*among the most daring and skilfully executed of the*

naval operations of this war. On no other occasion during hostilities has so small a force inflicted so much damage on the enemy". Thereafter nothing larger than a destroyer ever advanced beyond the bases minefields.

On 25th August Agar set out on his last attempt to rendezvous with Dukes. It was his 13th, his lucky number. He took Geffer, Marshall (the third Sub-Lieutenant), Beeley and Veroline. As they crossed the line of the forts, they were picked up by a searchlight. Soon others joined in, some dead ahead which blinded him, despite the smoked glass he kept handy to shade his eyes. He decided to turn back to Terrioki as they were being fired on quite heavily. He was going nearly full speed and zigzagging but still they held him. He realised that he had lost his direction and could no longer rely on the compass nor see the stars overhead. To reduce speed would make certain of getting hit by shells from one of the forts. He then suspected that one of the rudder ropes must have parted as the boat seemed to be going in circles. Suddenly they were brought up all standing and flung down to the bottom of the boat, temporarily knocked out or stunned, as if 'a railway train had come suddenly to a full stop when travelling at sixty miles an hour'.

They had run into a rock breakwater between one of the forts and Kotlin Island. The searchlights, for some reason, were switched off, except one that was so close that the beam swept over their heads. The boat was aground very close to a fort, badly holed and leaking. They had no engine or rudder and there was only three hours until first light. They plugged the hole with sea jackets, levered the boat from the breakwater with boathooks and all five began to bale for their lives using empty petrol tins with the tops cut off. Beeley made a makeshift sail from two long boathooks lashed together and all the canvas they could cut away and, for a rudder, tied two or three empty petrol tins together which Geffer 'cleverly used as a sea anchor'. By this time, the searchlight overhead had also been switched off. 'Steadily we drifted and sailed to the north east, aided by some miracle of a current which set us towards the direction of Terrioki. Our speed must have been no more than a bare two knots or less, made up of a knot of swell, half a knot of current and half a knot from the makeshift sail, but sufficient to get us out of the danger area by dawn.' Two small fishing boats now appeared from the direction of the forts. 'Persuaded by our machine guns, they gave us their sails and a mast which we stepped in the cockpit of our boat.'

They reached the Yacht Club breakwater by noon, 'having brought our 40 foot CMB, with five souls in her, sixteen miles across the Gulf of Finland with two large holes in her bottom in just under twelve hours.' Later, it emerged that Paul Dukes, after his earlier failure to contact the CMB and hearing false reports of Agar's death, had already left, with Peter, by the overland route taking his 'stuff' disguised as packets of salt – a scarce commodity that was often carried because it could be bartered for currency on a long journey. Agar's nearly fatal last trip had been unnecessary. They destroyed the boat at Terrioki by blowing it up and he then, on instructions from London, left to join up with the CMB Flotilla at Biorko. Their activities were now well known to the Red Commissars in Petrograd and a large reward, reputed to be £5,000, had been placed on Agar's capture, dead or alive.

The Baltic states in the end managed to resist the Bolshevik forces and a peace treaty between the Baltic States and Soviet Russia was signed at Tartu in February 1921.

Gus Agar went on to command the light cruiser HMS *Emerald* and the ill fated HMS *Dorsetshire* during WW2 and eventually passed away in 1968 at the age of 78. He is buried at Alton in Hampshire. *CMB 4* survived the war and is now a museum exhibit at IWM Duxford, though sadly in poor condition and much in need of renovation tucked away as she is at the back of No 3 hanger.



CMB4 as she is today – a museum exhibit at IWM Duxford

Kama River

On the Siberian front allied involvement in the fighting was much more limited with only a single battalion of the Hampshire Regiment, under Colonel Johnson, plus the Middlesex Battalion, under Colonel John Ward, being actively involved in the fighting in support of Admiral Kolchak's white Russians. Even though a large Japanese force was present it seemed content merely to occupy key areas of Siberia (it was in Japan's interests that Russia remained divided and weak). Meanwhile the American Expeditionary Force to Siberia were content simply to guard the huge stockpiles of arms and ammunition in Vladivostok.

There was however a British naval unit, the Royal Marine gunnery detachment, which had fought with Ward's battalion on the Ussuri river and continued to fight with considerable distinction as a small unit integrated with the Russian forces. It provided artillery support for the Czech legion in their advance from Omsk to Ufa, well beyond the Ural mountains, and then formed a small naval mission to assist Kolchak in creating a Russian Naval flotilla to operate on the river Kama. The river Kama flows down from Perm in the Urals to join the Volga. It is two miles wide in places and navigable by large river craft.

The mission was commanded by captain Wolfe-Murray (RMLI) and used guns that had previously been mounted on railway carriages (1x6", 4x12pdrs) and instead mounted them on requisitioned river craft. There was a large paddle driven river boat that was converted into a gunboat by the addition of the 12pdrs and a machine gun, and a huge tug drawn barge upon which was mounted the 6" gun. The detachment itself was made up of volunteers from the cruisers *Kent* and *Suffolk*, which were then anchored in Vladivostok harbour, and was commanded by Captain Jameson. The *Kent* and the *Suffolk*, as the detachment had dubbed it's new vessels, were to find their gunnery skills in some demand.

The Czech legion, in a surprise winter offensive under their commander General Gaida, took intact the town of Perm and it's bridge over the Kama river. The open plains west of the Urals over which the whites were fighting are criss-crossed by several large rivers which were vital for communications away from the railways as the roads were boggy from the spring thaw. The flotilla got their first chance for action in the early spring of 1919. No sooner had the ice cleared from the river the makeshift force of river craft were deployed to Perm in support of the white forces fighting near the banks of the river. They also mounted their own operations to seek out and destroy any Red vessels that opposed them on the river. The Kama flotilla was to become one of the most professional of Kolchak's forces and the main concern of Admiral Smirnov, the Omsk Minister of Marine, who had been Kolchak's Chief of Staff when he commanded the Black Sea fleet, though in the event they were more often than not in action covering the withdrawal of the white forces rather than supporting it's advances.

Caspian Sea

The mighty river Volga empties into the inland fresh water Caspian Sea. At the signing of the armistice that ended the Great War, British forces assumed control of the major port of Baku on the Caspian, which it had taken over from Turkish forces upon Turkey's surrender.

The aim of the British was to assist and train local forces against the Bolsheviks and deter them from advancing from the north. The official position of the British Government and its allies was that they were acting in support of the Whites as the legal government of Russia and that the new Caucasian republics remained part of Russia. The ships of the British Caspian Flotilla had been taken to Baku by Commodore Norris along with their crews (only very few of which were RN officers and ratings). All ships wore the Russian ensign and were expected to integrate with the Russian Centro-Caspian flotilla.

This combined flotilla comprised

- *Kars* and *Ardagan* - diesel powered gunboats (630 tons, 1x4.7", 2x4", 1x3", 14 knots),
- *Astrabad* - despatch vessel (325 tons, 5x3pdr, 11 knots)
- *Geok Tepe* - despatch vessel (1010 tons, 4x4pdr, 4xMG, 11 knots),
- *Araks* - surveying ship (745 tons, 4x3pdr, 12½ knots),
- *Skobelev* - hospital ship
- 12x55ft Coastal Motor Boats (CMB) - brought by rail for use in the shallow northern Caspian.

The following auxiliary ships (all coastal freighters unless otherwise stated)

- *Kruger* - freighter with some passenger accommodation; 5x4". (flagship)
- *Windsor Castle* (ex-*Lieutenant Smidt* - renamed by RN) – 4x4"; half-leader
- *Emile Nobel* - Oil tanker; 3x6", 1x4.7in (the flotilla "battleship").
- *Bibiabat* – 3x4".
- *Slava* – 1x6", 1x4".
- *Dublin Castle* (ex-*Jupiter* - renamed by RN) – 2x6".
- *Ventuir* (sometimes known as *Venture*) – 3x4".
- *Asia* – 4x4".
- *Zoroaster* (usually in reserve as too unreliable for operations) – 2x4".
- *Ala Verdi* - Defective boilers, paid off
- *Edinburgh Castle* (ex-*Soyous* renamed by RN) - CMB carrier; 1x12pdr.
- *Sergie* - CMB carrier; 1x12pdr, one AA pom-pom.
- *Orlinoch* - seaplane carrier; 2 aircraft; 2x4".
- *A. Yusanoff* - seaplane carrier (unreliable, in reserve).

The Flotilla was soon in action for the first time. Intelligence had been received that the Bolsheviks planned to set up a base at Staro-Terechnaya on the mainland near Chechen Island. On 8th December the *Zoroaster* and *Alla Verdi* were anchored off the island when three similarly armed Bolshevik ships appeared escorting three transports and opened fire on them. The British hurriedly got under way and a brisk fire fight ensued as the Bolshevik ships, despite their advantage in numbers, withdrew. Both sides registered hits and a fire was started in one Bolshevik boat and *Zoroaster* sustained three hits but suffered no casualties. The British expended a considerable amount of ammunition in this skirmish, which was a cause for concern because of the difficulty of obtaining more. However, the expenditure proved to be well worthwhile as the flotilla had established a moral superiority from the start. The beginnings of the Bolshevik base were found and destroyed by gunfire on 29th December. Thereafter patrols were maintained until the north Caspian iced up in mid-January but the Bolsheviks made no further attempt to establish the base.



CMB61 is lifted onto a railway truck for transport overland from Batum on the Black Sea to Baku on the Caspian.

It had long been known that the Centro-Caspian Flotilla and the Volunteer Army were unreliable and engaged mainly in racketeering but during the December 1918 operations radio intercepts showed beyond doubt that the ships were in contact with the Bolshevik Flotilla at Astrakhan and were thus very much worse than useless. Eventually the British Government decided that their forces would have to take more direct charge and in March 1919 the Volunteer Army unit was ordered out of the city and the Centro-Caspian Flotilla forcibly disbanded, the gunboats were immobilised and disarmed and the best of the armed merchant ships incorporated into the RN Flotilla. This meant that more RN officers and ratings were required. The flotilla hoisted the white ensign, adopted the prefix HMS, and became a truly RN formation. Commodore Norris hoisted his broad pennant in SS (now HMS) *Kruger*.

Thus to begin with the British Caspian flotilla was virtually unchallenged on the Caspian Sea, though the reds, who had a powerful flotilla on the Volga comprising the light destroyers *Karl Leibknecht*, *Yakob Sverdlov*, *Turkhmenetz-Stavropolski*, *Dostioni*, *Rastoropni*, *Dyatelni*, *Dyalni*, *Storoshevol*, *Meitki*, *Prytki*, *Proschni*, and *Retyvi*, soon brought several of these vessels down from the Baltic by canal and river to the mouth of the Volga. The flotilla retired to Baku for the winter, keeping one ship at Pavlovsk to make occasional patrols of the ice edge. The rest were far from idle and used the enforced lie-up to make improvements to the ships and their engines and refitted boilers. The boilers of most were old and in a bad state, not improved by the local practice of using sea water as feed. This contained little salt but was hardly ideal for the purpose, even in ships where the working pressures were between 65 and 110 psi.

The Caspian flotilla was not the only force that the British had operating on the Caspian Sea though, 221 squadron was based at Petrovsk, half way up the western coast, and flew DH9 single engined bombers from an airfield just outside the town. It undertook reconnaissance missions for the flotilla and bombed the Bolshevik flotilla, Astrakhan and the naval bases in the Volga delta. In April it was joined by the seaplanes of 226 squadron, which based itself in the Anglo-Asiatic Bank building and developed a seaplane base on the coast. This became operational only after they had modified their planes for the less buoyant fresh water of the Caspian Sea.

The biggest and most successful operation by the Flotilla occurred in mid-May. It was discovered that most of the Bolshevik ships had left the delta and moved to the large harbour at Alexandrovsk, on the eastern side of the sea about 240km roughly due east of Chechen Island, probably because their previous bases were threatened by Volunteer Army advances. The British seaplane and CMB carriers

had recently been completed and were summoned. The intention was first to examine the coast in the vicinity of Alexandrovsk, where there were many uncharted shoals and from which all navigation marks had been removed. Aircraft were to examine the harbour and then if the situation was right CMBs would attack. This plan was frustrated by the weather, which alternated between thick fog and periods when it was too rough to operate seaplanes. A Bolshevik convoy of three armed ships and two large barges escorted by a destroyer was encountered. The escorts abandoned the barges, which were sunk, and made off. The British gave chase for a while before the fog came down again when they returned to Chechen. Months later it was discovered from Bolshevik deserters that their fleet was at sea at the time intending to attack the Chechen anchorage but became lost in the fog and returned to harbour, some to the delta but most to Alexandrovsk. The two sides had passed each other unawares during the foggy night.

A very adventurous reconnaissance of Alexandrovsk by a seaplane from Petrovsk on 18th May revealed that eight destroyers, five armed ships, 14 armed motorboats and two gunboats were in the harbour (there were, in fact, also 2-3 submarines, a minelayer and two small base/depot ships). Another attack was mounted. The Caspian Flotilla ships taking part were *Kruger*, *Windsor Castle*, *Emile Nobel*, *Asia*, *Ventuir* and three carriers; *Sergie* and *Windsor Castle* (CMB) and *A. Yusanoff* (seaplanes). They arrived off Alexandrovsk in the early hours of 20th May 1919. The harbour is roughly V-shaped, six miles long with the mouth facing north. The eastern side was protected by unmarked sand banks.

Weather conditions were not ideal so although a seaplane flew a bombing and reconnaissance sortie it was unsuccessful in both tasks. A second sortie was attempted but the plane crashed on take off. The carriers were then ordered to withdraw while the rest of the flotilla endeavoured to find out what was in the harbour and awaited *Slava* and *Bibiabat*, who were on their way from Baku. *Zoroaster* however had to return to Petrovsk with engine defects.

The next day, 21st May, dawned bright and clear. Commodore Norris decided to close the harbour for a good look. Two or three destroyers were outside the harbour to the north and it was hoped to cut them off but they disappeared at high speed. Other craft at the harbour mouth opened accurate fire without registering hits. Norris decided to lead his slow and ramshackle line into the harbour, hoping that this audacious show of force would panic the Bolsheviks.

On the approach only *Emile Nobel* (6") and *Ventuir* (modern 4") were within range but these made good practice. Two of the most formidable Bolshevik craft, a barge with two 6" guns and a large armed ship near the harbour entrance were set on fire and abandoned. The other ships retired up harbour. During this exchange *Emile Nobel* was hit in the engine room and suffered damage and casualties. The action became confused. The Bolshevik ships still had plenty of firepower and a shore battery joined in. If the British stayed in the outer part of the harbour their targets were out of range of most of their guns, if they closed the range the harbour narrowed and there was very little room to manoeuvre the very unhandy low-powered ships. At 13:30, after 75 minutes of action, Norris ordered his ships to haul off out of harbour, *Emile Nobel* had reported that she would be unable to steam for much longer and his own ship had damaged steering gear.

There was now an ideal opportunity to mount a CMB attack but the carriers old and unsuitable W/T sets let them down. Norris was unable to summon them and withdrew to the south to find them and to sort out his force. *Emile Nobel* limped back to Petrovsk and *Zoroaster's* engines finally gave up. After detaching these with escorts only *Kruger*, *Ventuir* and the carriers were left.

Next day, 22nd May, activity was confined to bombing Alexandrovsk with *Yusupoff's* one remaining seaplane, which managed five sorties but had not returned when the fog came down again shortly before nightfall. By great good fortune, the flotilla found the pilot and observer next day clinging to the one remaining float of their aircraft and having been in the water for more than 24 hours.

After a foggy night, *Kruger* and *Ventuir* were suddenly confronted by two of the largest Bolshevik destroyers south of Alexandrovsk. There was an exchange of fire but once again the Bolsheviks failed to take advantage of their greatly superior speed and gun range and soon disappeared to the north. It later transpired that all the remaining Bolshevik ships had left Aleksandrovsk after the action and returned to Astrakhan. Once again the two sides had passed during the fog without sighting each other. The British returned to the scene of the action to find that as a result of their raid they had sunk one Bolshevik destroyer, a small depot ship and smaller craft. As it turned out, the encounter on 23rd May was the last time the British saw their opponents, who went further up the Volga and yielded command of the Caspian. At the time, of course, the British were not to know this and for their remaining time led a

boring existence patrolling from the Chechen anchorage in stiflingly hot weather. Ironically, it was just at this time that the flotilla received the long awaited reinforcements of officers and ratings, enabling them to be properly manned for their task.

In June word was received from the Peace Conference that the area was to become an Italian mandate and that their forces would take over from the British. This plan collapsed after a change of government in Italy. There followed a period of uncertainty, the White Russians were to take over, then they were not, then they might, finally they did. The ships, mostly fitted with newer and more effective armament, together with all RAF aircraft were handed over in stages from July to August 1919.

A British military mission remained in Tiflis and at Denekins HQ after the departure of the British forces. In 1921 they reported that their Russian hosts had asked for assistance in maintaining the British guns in what was now their Caspian Flotilla. A party of 29 ratings and a warrant officer were despatched to Baku under the command of a gunnery specialist Commander B.A. Fraser¹. They found the weapons in a very bad state, apparently not having been maintained since the British left. They had hardly started work when yet another coup brought the Bolsheviks to power in the city once more. The British were arrested and imprisoned in appalling conditions together with members of the ousted regime and common criminals. There followed a hostage crisis such as became all too familiar in the later years of the century. After some weeks they were moved to a disused school, where the conditions improved but they remained in confinement. Eventually, after some six months in captivity, and following prolonged negotiation with the Georgian government as intermediary they were released and returned to the United Kingdom by warship.

¹ Later Admiral of the Fleet Lord Fraser of North Cape.

Lake Onega

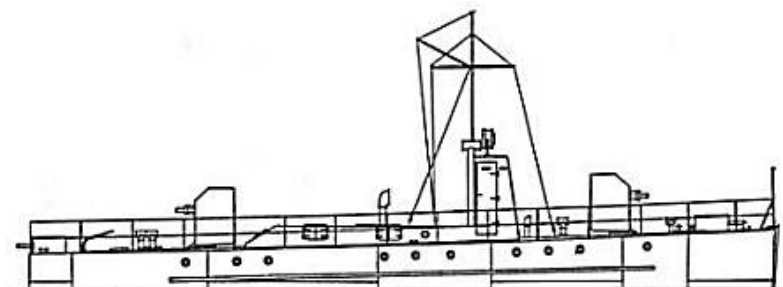
In the early months of 1918 the security of the northern ice free port of Murmansk was endangered by the civil war in neighbouring Finland involving the German sympathising white Finns and the Bolshevik sympathising red Finns. The Finnish border ran roughly parallel to the new Murman railway all the way through to Petrograd from Murmansk. If the Germans, through the white Finns, succeeded in capturing Murmansk it would break the stranglehold of the Allied blockade and send submarines to threaten the vital north Atlantic traffic of supplies and troop convoys.

Admiral Kemp, commander of the British Northern Squadron asked for six thousand men to defend the port, but the admiralty advised that no troops were available at the time, though he could use the crews of his ships to resist any overland German advance on Murmansk. The Bolshevik commander in Murmansk, Yuryev, with Trotsky's approval, appealed to Admiral Kemp for allied forces to help bolster the defence of the Murman railway. Consequently 130 marines went ashore, set up naval guns and prepared to repel the Finns. This small force was gradually increased with more marines and a small force of 600, mostly category B British soldiers, the majority of whom had been evacuated wounded from France. In keeping with this their commanding officer, Major General Sir Charles Maynard had also been declared unfit for general service as a consequence of being invalided home from Salonika.

Maynard's command was small and his political situation complex in the extreme since after repelling initial border incursions from the white Finns the armistice was signed with Germany. The Finnish civil war concluded and Maynard found that his enemies were now the same Bolsheviks who had initially appealed to him for help. After enduring the Arctic winter Maynard finally went on the offensive in March 1919 advancing rapidly with his small force down the Murmansk – Petrograd rail line supported by an armoured train. The assault finally came to a halt on 21st May with the capture of the two large towns Medveyja Gora and Povynets on the northern approaches to Lake Onega.

Lake Onega is the second largest lake in Europe and Maynard attempted to take control of it by advancing into the northern end of the Shunga peninsula which juts out into the lake from the north. Forces at his disposal were two flights of newly arrived seaplanes and a number of small 40' armed launches (37 tons, 1x3", 2xMGs) and "Jolly Roger" motor gunboats that he had had shipped to the front by train. The Shunga peninsula was a generally anti-Bolshevik and populous area and Maynard now attempted to spread a counter revolution against the Bolsheviks by sending a consignment of arms 20 miles across the lake from Povynets to Shunga village, even though the lake was still mainly under Bolshevik control. The residents of Shunga, encouraged by Maynard's close proximity, had indeed already risen against the Bolsheviks. The plan worked; the arms arrived safely, the rising spread and in two weeks Maynard had full control of the peninsula.

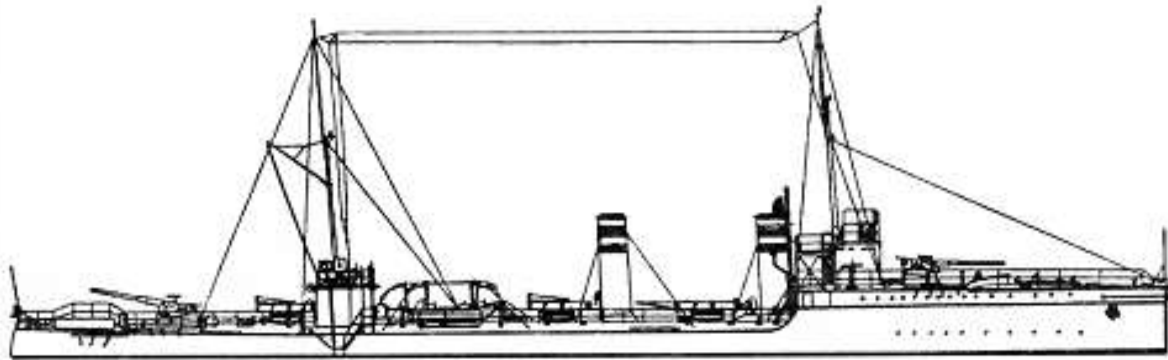
At the beginning of 1919 the Bolshevik Onega flotilla had total of 9 gunboats, 3 minelayers, 10 patrol vessels, 4 patrol cutters and 2 floating batteries. The bulk of this force was made up of improvised requisitioned vessels. The crews were mainly drawn from the Baltic fleet and Onega Lake merchant marine crews. On Feb 10th 1919 four small 24 ton river gunboats were transferred to the Onega flotilla from the Volkhov-Ilmen flotilla. They were No 1 ("*International*"), No 2 ("*Communist*"), No 5 ("*Proletary*") and No 9 ("*Spartak*"). These small river boats were from the 1915 programme of army river craft. This programme comprised nine 24 ton armoured motor gunboats (12.5 knots, 2x75mm, 2xMG), eighteen 15 ton armoured motor boats (11.5 knots, 2xMG), eighteen 16 ton dispatch motor boats, twelve MSBs, 750 motor pontoons and thirty 24' armoured LCs. Draught for all these vessels was less than 2' and their dimensions allowed transportation via railroad. The boats were distributed between flotillas on the Pripet marshes, lake Onega, lake Ilmen and the Don and Volga rivers. The Onega flotilla boats were commissioned as patrol vessels 1, 2, 3 and 4.



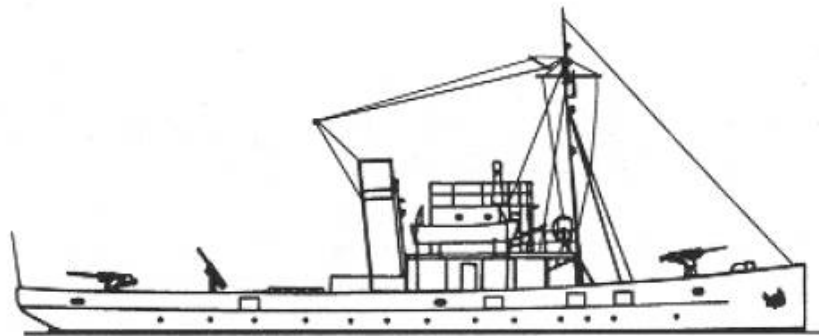
24 ton K class armoured motor gunboat from the 1915 programme

The flotilla was scattered between several bases. The main base was at Petrozavodsk where the headquarters and gunboats division were situated. Two others were at Lodeinoe Pole and Novaya Ladoga and served as support bases. The main dockyard was situated in Vozneseniye (on the Onega lake coast) where repair work and armament refits were carried out. These dispositions gave the flotilla the option of operating on both lakes and transferring their boats to the most dangerous regions through Svir river.

In June the Bolshevik Onega flotilla was concentrated in Sviritsa (at the outfall of Svir river) and transports in the mouth of Olonka river. To increase the fire power of the flotilla the Baltic fleet *Gaidamak* class destroyers *Amuretz*, *Ussurietz* and *Vsadnik* (570 ton, 25 knots, 2x4", 1x3pdr, 1x1pdr, 4xMGs and 3x18" deck mounted torpedoes) and three *Barsuk* class patrol boats *Kunitsa*, *Laska* and *Vydra* (168 ton, 11 knots, 1x75mm, 1x40mm) were transferred from Shlisselburg to Sviritsa to join the flotilla.



Gaidamak class destroyer.



Barsuk class patrol boat

Great efforts were made by Maynard's forces against these significant Bolshevik forces to take control of at least part of the lake. The allied flotilla was based to Medvezhya Gora (Bear's Mountain) on the north coast of Bolshaya Guba (Big Bay) where repair shops and ammunition depots were set up. It comprised 7 chasers, 10 cutters, 2 tug boats and one gunboat. Maynard's two flights of seaplanes he also based at Medveyeja Gora. These sank four Bolshevik vessels and captured three other substantial ones including the destroyer *Vsadnik* and an armed tug. Other vessels were captured as the lake thawed.

The Bolsheviks were far being beaten however and on 26th June 1919, the transports "*Garibaldi*", "*Kibalchich*", "*Som*" and "*Balmashov*" escorted by gunboats No 1, No 2 and No 4 were sent to the outfall of the Olonka river to embark a landing party. The same day the destroyers "*Amurets*" and "*Ussuriyets*", minelayer "*Yauza*" and the patrol boat "*Vydra*" joined the troop transports.

On 27th June at 3:00 a.m. the ships set sail for their landing places: "*Amurets*", "*Ussuriyets*", "*Yauza*", "*Laska*", No 2 gunboat and the transport "*Balmashov*" headed for Vidlitsa, while "*Vydra*", No 1 and No 4 gunboats and transports "*Som*" and "*Garibaldi*" headed for Tuloksa. The transport "*Kibalchich*" remained at the outfall of the Olonka river.

At 5:25 a.m. the destroyers opened fire on enemy batteries near Vidlica factory whilst "*Laska*" fired on the allied barracks. "*Yauza*" fired on Vidlica factory till 8:00 a.m. when the allied batteries were suppressed and landing party from the transport "*Balmashov*" was landed supported by No 2 gunboat.

At this time "Vydra" and gunboats No 1 and No 4 were engaging the allied batteries near Tuloksa. But the batteries gun fire was too strong and the landing party had to land to the north-west of Tuloksa. The Tuloksa landing party then marched to join Vidlica landing party. The Bolsheviks eventually took Vidlica with little damage to their flotilla.

Even considering this setback, these were still substantial achievements for Maynard's tiny force but the effects of prolonged operations, and the confusing nature of why they were even there, were beginning to have a very detrimental effect on the soldier's morale. The first, but by no means the only, unit to suffer were Maynard's original Royal Marine detachment (known as Glory 3), who had been on continuous active service in North Russia, without leave, for fourteen months. Maynard embarrassingly described them as having shown "*such exceedingly bad spirit that I am sending them from Medvyejya to Murmansk at once to await first opportunity for embarkation to England. I am very disappointed in behaviour of both officers and men*". The marines for their part documented their grievances in a letter to their commanding officer concluding that "*We think we have been out here long enough and what is more have been messed about like a flock of sheep without a Shepard ... we have been nothing but a dung heap for the Army.*"

The situation could clearly not be sustained as it was and by early June the War Office informed Maynard that all the men who had overwintered in the north were to be out of Russia by 1st September and that furthermore there would be no prospect of fresh British troops for his command. This coupled with the refusal of a Russian regiment to advance on and occupy the western flank of the lake and similar problems with his Italian troops meant that far from being able to build on his success Maynard's position was becoming untenable. An attempt by Churchill to bolster the Murmansk front by diverting the 6th Royal Marine Light Infantry battalion from their planned ceremonial posting to Schleswig-Holstein to Murmansk disastrously backfired.

The first use of the battalion was in the continuation of the advance down the corridor between lake Onega and the Finnish frontier towards the Suma river line, no longer an attempt to join up with other white Russian forces but an attempt to create a defensible position for the white Russians to hold when the British withdrew. The main advance on Koikori and Ussuna was strongly resisted by the Bolsheviks and the assault stalled almost as soon as it had started. Then it broke down completely as the 6th RMLI reserve companies refused direct orders to advance. This resulted in the single largest incidence of court martial in the history of the Royal Marines. Two company commanding officers and ninety four other ranks were tried. Both officers and eighty nine other ranks were found guilty. The most serious of the charges was "*disobeying so as to show wilful defiance*" for which one NCO and twelve marines were condemned to death. Thereafter the 6th RMLI disappeared from the Royal Marine order of battle and the numeral 6 has not since been connected with any of it's combat units.

By 22nd September 1919 all the allied troops had withdrawn to Medvyejya Gora and by the 25th the lake flotilla and aircraft had been transferred to the white Russians. The line of the Suma river was never reached by the whites, and the Nurmis river line, which the British handed over to the whites, was vacated within four days when the Bolsheviks steamed a strong flotilla up lake Onega and landed a force behind them. This was a danger which had been evident from the moment the line of the furthest advance had been selected as water is only an obstacle if the enemy has nothing to sail on it and the Bolsheviks were never deprived of their lake flotilla.

The resistance of the white Russian army in north Russia was not finally extinguished until 21st Feb 1920. That it held together as long as this is less to do with the fighting qualities of the 25,000 white Russian soldiers left to defend the region than to the fact that with the allies gone there was no urgency on the part of the Bolsheviks to quash the white Russian resistance in the north.

Archangel

In the late evening of 27th July 1918 an allied expeditionary force steamed down the Kola inlet and headed east for the White Sea and the approaches to Archangel. Captain Altham in the cruiser HMS *Attentive* took the lead. Behind her sailed the allied seaplane carrier HMS *Nairana* and the French cruiser *Amiral Aube*. Then came two former Russian destroyers now crewed by the Royal Navy and Admiral Kemp's force of trawler-minesweepers. *Attentive* carried 100 French infantry, *Nairana* 200 and *Amiral Aube* 200 plus 100 Royal Marines. The remainder of the French infantry battalion plus some Poles, a detachment of US marines from *Olympia* and General Poole's training mission were distributed amongst the trawlers. The admiral's yacht, HMS *Salvation*, with General Poole on board, completed the armada.



HMS Attentive

This was the force with which the allies intended to assault the port of Archangel. The various elements had never trained together and were ill-prepared for their venture. Things soon went from bad to worse when dense fog caused the ships to part company and within 24 hours *Amiral Aube* reported that she had run aground. A planned coup in the town orchestrated by the White Russian general Chaplin was expected to be successful, but Archangel lay 25 miles up the tortuous and island strewn Dvina estuary whose entrance was dominated by the island fortress of Modyuski with its four 6" guns, close to which ran the only navigable channel for the deep-draught warships leading the expedition and which was reportedly mined. Undaunted Admiral Kemp and Brigadier General Finlayson (the operational commander under General Poole), decided to push on with their plans.

After a failed attempt to negotiate the surrender of the Modyuski garrison, *Attentive* entered into a fire fight with the battery. Much of the Bolshevik fire was wide, but one well handled 6" gun soon had the range and took out one of *Attentive's* four funnels and the two boilers beneath it. Fortunately by this time the cruiser's fire was beginning to tell, assisted by some effective bombing from *Nairana's* seaplanes, and Modyuski's guns soon fell silent. Part of the assault force was landed on the island after the Bolshevik garrison had fled up harbour. Two wounded French infantrymen were the only casualties on the allied side. From then on the occupation of Archangel was little more than a formality, and the allied armada steamed up the estuary in triumphal procession, led by the slightly damaged cruiser, the threat from mines and block ships being easily avoided by the experienced pilots now captive on the vessels. Meanwhile all the paddle steamers and every other type of vessel that the Bolsheviks could lay their hands on in Archangel were hurrying up the Dvina to the south.

Aside from the railway running south to Vologda, the rivers of the region were the main communication links with the south during the summer months when the great thaw made the tracks and the few roads boggy and often impassable. The only significant settlements lay in the clearings along the river banks which the tracks tended to follow. Over the rest of the land great coniferous forests stretched to the

horizon. The river Dvina, a mile and a half wide in places, was nevertheless relatively shallow with shifting sandbanks.



As he planned his advance south, General Poole was presented with two problems. The further south his forces pushed, the more widely separated became his tiny forces as the routes diverged. It was the perennial problem for the invader of Russia, whose vast territory ultimately swallowed up hostile forces of whatever size. The second difficulty was the climate's dramatic variation between winter and summer. When winter descended the Dvina at Archangel froze over with ice a yard thick, the hours of darkness extended dramatically and all activity was restricted to the few hours of twilight each day. Seasonal change gave the allied force an additional tactical difficulty as they were based north of their enemy, their section of the river thawed later in the spring and froze over earlier in the winter, and since all supplies would have to be distributed from Archangel by river barge or frozen track this time difference was critical and gave the Bolsheviks a brief but clear advantage. Their river-based artillery, mounted on shallow-draught craft, could remain in support of forward troops later at the end of the summer and return earlier in the late spring, when the river at Archangel was still choked with ice. Adding to General Poole's difficulties was his lack of boat-based artillery which could rival the Bolsheviks'. The guns of *Attentive* and *Cochrane* were of no help away from the coast as the shallow waters of the North Russian rivers prevented these deep draught ships from pushing inland.

The main justification for intervention in north Russia, the threat of a German advance from Finland, was already disappearing even as General Poole's forces approached Archangel. Also the military supplies stored at Archangel, the securing of which were a secondary objective, had largely been spirited away by the Bolsheviks before even the expedition landed. The final objective of linking up with the Czech legion now seemed highly unlikely also due to setbacks suffered by Admiral Kolchak's forces. Poole was therefore issued with very vague instructions to, amongst other things, "*co-operate in restoring Russia*". Poole interpreted this very loose definition of his forces role to his own ends, which were fervently anti-Bolshevist, and declared his intention to "*proceed up the river Dvina, making good and reassuring the chief centres of population, and eventually to occupy and hold Kotlas*". However Kotlas was some 250 miles south from Archangel and Poole was intending to advance on it with a force of 150 French, 50 British and 50 Poles and Russians (which the whites were to supply). Indeed this was one of four similarly sized forces that were to advance south down rail and river from Archangel. The Dvina party was to advance by bounds of about 60 miles, travelling in three river boats escorted by two tugs.

One boat was to mount a 75mm gun "if personnel can be found to man it", and every effort was to be made to recruit volunteers en-route.

Luckily Poole, who had been badgering London for weeks, received re-enforcements on 26th August in the form of the 2/10 Royal Scots who arrived just in time to bolster his assault groups, not that the 2/10 were a crack unit their ranks being mainly drawn up of war-weary soldiers recovering from wounds and unfit for service in France. Soon though, on 4th September, he received more substantial re-enforcements of three battalions from the US 339th Infantry Regiment, supported by engineers, a field hospital and an ambulance company. Poole conveniently overlooked President Wilson's directive that US troops be used only to guard military stores, and instead dispersed the three battalions in support of the various fronts as he saw fit, the 1st battalion being dispatched in barges to the Dvina front.

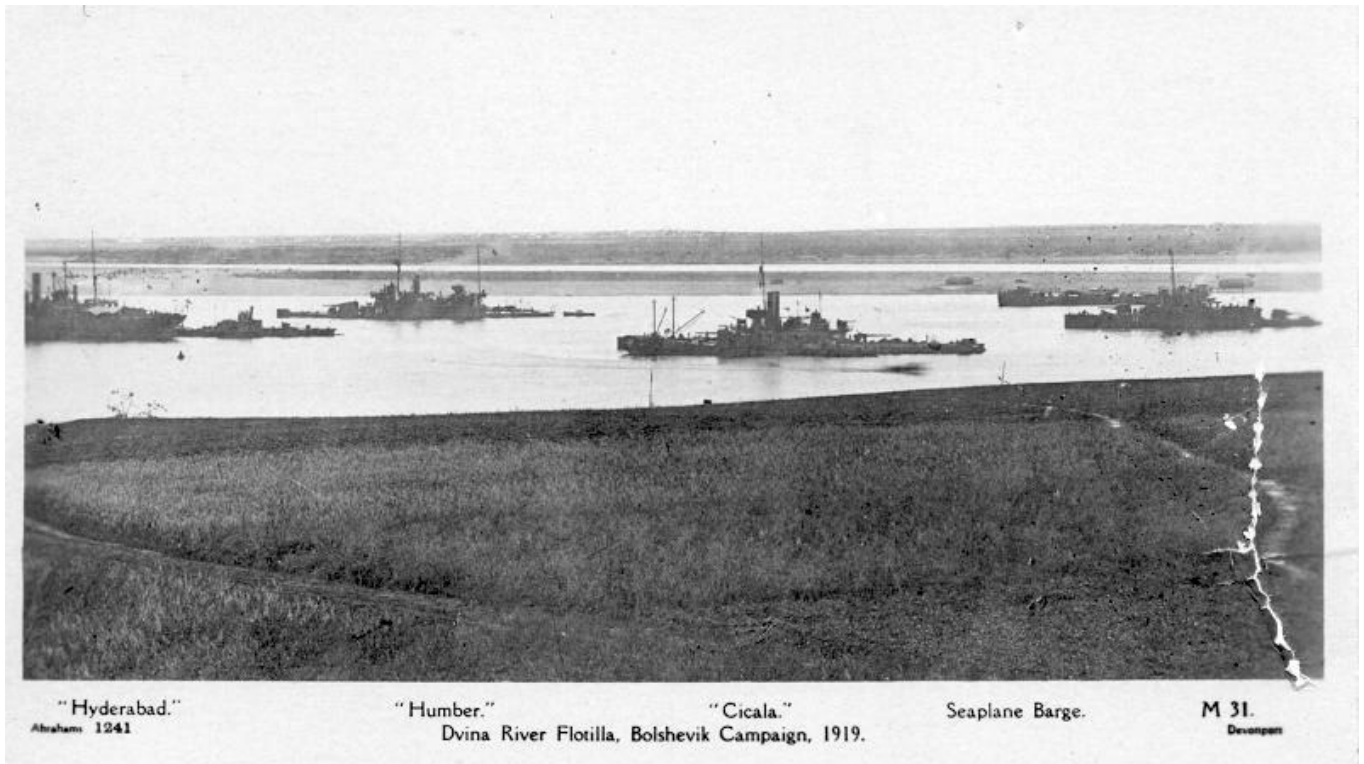


Major General Poole's days in command were numbered however as a combination of his own high-handedness, his overt support for a coup led by the white Russian generals which temporarily deposed the democratic government under Nikolai Chaikovsky and the inevitable military reverses as his tiny force met with increasingly organised and resolute resistance from the Bolsheviks led to his being ordered home aboard HMS *Attentive*, apparently on leave. He was not to return.

Poole's replacement was Brigadier General Edmund Ironside and he arrived in Archangel on 30th September, though initially he was supposedly Poole's new Chief of Staff, and it was not until 19th November that the War Office told Ironside officially that Poole was not returning and that he was appointed Commander-in-Chief in his stead. Ironside's initial tasks were to prepare and organise his disparate forces for the coming winter, though the sudden withdrawal of the small flotilla of allied gunboats to Archangel as the ice took a brief hold brought the first crisis of the campaign, for while the Bolshevik gunboats were able quickly to return to support their troops, when a rapid thaw unexpectedly followed, Altham's Dvina flotilla were not as the Archangel anchorages and the river above them were already blocked by ice. This was a desperate loss when you consider that the overstretched Dvina

flotilla had up till then been the army's main source of supplies and re-enforcements as well as their sole substantial artillery support.

Captain Altham returned to England with *Attentive*, where she was paid off on Trafalgar day 1918, but his specialist knowledge of the particular problems of the campaign were acknowledged when he was given command of a much re-enforced flotilla, with HMS *Fox* as his new flagship, and once again sent to north Russia. Indeed the nucleus of the flotilla had arrived at Archangel just before the winter freeze ended all movement. These were four *Insect* class river gunboats, originally built for service on the Danube, they were now dispatched to Archangel where they joined the monitors M23 and M25 which had already been laid up in winter quarters. It was planned to re-enforce Altham's flotilla further with the addition of four more small monitors, two more *Insect* class gunboats, four shallow draught minesweepers, six coastal motor boats and a great number of auxiliary craft as soon as the conditions permitted.



Most of the vessels had to be specifically modified for the extreme weather conditions in north Russia with for example both mosquito netting for the short but nearly tropical summer, and heaters to enable aircraft engines to be warmed in cold weather. Locally improvised modifications were also made, notably to the *Insect* class gunboat's Mk VII 6 inch guns to allow greater elevation and increase the gun's maximum range of 13,500 yards, which was initially discovered to be 1,500 yards less than the guns of the Bolshevik flotilla. After chipping away at the mountings their maximum range was increased to 16,100 yards. It also appears that at least the gunboats were painted overall in green the better to camouflage them against the inevitable backdrop of pine forest. There were also fast, shallow-draught steamers for the use of the Commander in Chief and the flotilla commander, as well as a roomy depot ship which could act as a military hospital, bakery, refrigerator and general supply ship for the front line units. In addition there was a need for many small utility vessels for transporting the wounded, POWs and the like, and lighters equipped as small workshops to modify ships for their river roles and keep them all in service. Seaplanes were also added to the force being much more useful than the land based version given the terrain prevalent in North Russia.

General Ironside's efforts over the winter months in recruiting and training local Russian units to take the field and bolster his meagre forces had resulted in the formation of a number of battalions of British trained Russian recruits. One of these, the 2nd Battalion 3rd North Russian Rifles had taken it's place in the front line at Toulgas on the Dvina with a complete field battery and subsection of a heavy battery in direct support. In the early hours of 25th April the battalion mutinied, and after murdering seven of their officers disappeared into the woods where the Bolshevik forces awaited them. Then the whole force turned to attack the remnants of the force holding Toulgas. Heavy fire from the artillery supported by a Canadian battery at Kurgomen halted the attack. Then on 30th April the Bolshevik flotilla appeared. Set

up under the Deputy Chairman, P.F. Vinogradov, of Archangel's Executive Committee, the North Dvina Flotilla was based at Kotlas and formed the from volunteer seamen of the Northern Ledovitaya (Arctic) Flotilla that had fled from Archangel. At the commencement of the spring campaign of 1919 the flotilla included 3 combat detachments, in which were counted:

- 6 river gunboats
- 7 armed tugboats
- 6 escort vessels
- 11 motor patrol boats
- 15 transport barges
- 3 dispatch boats

The gunboats were converted from steamboats and armed with two to four 75-130mm. The flotilla supported a combined attack by 2,500 Bolshevik troops with another 3,000 massed against the allied positions across the river at Kurgomen. Only superior discipline and very professional artillery work prevented the 550 allied troops from being over-run. The Bolshevik flotilla retired under the weight of accurate fire they received from the 60 pounders.

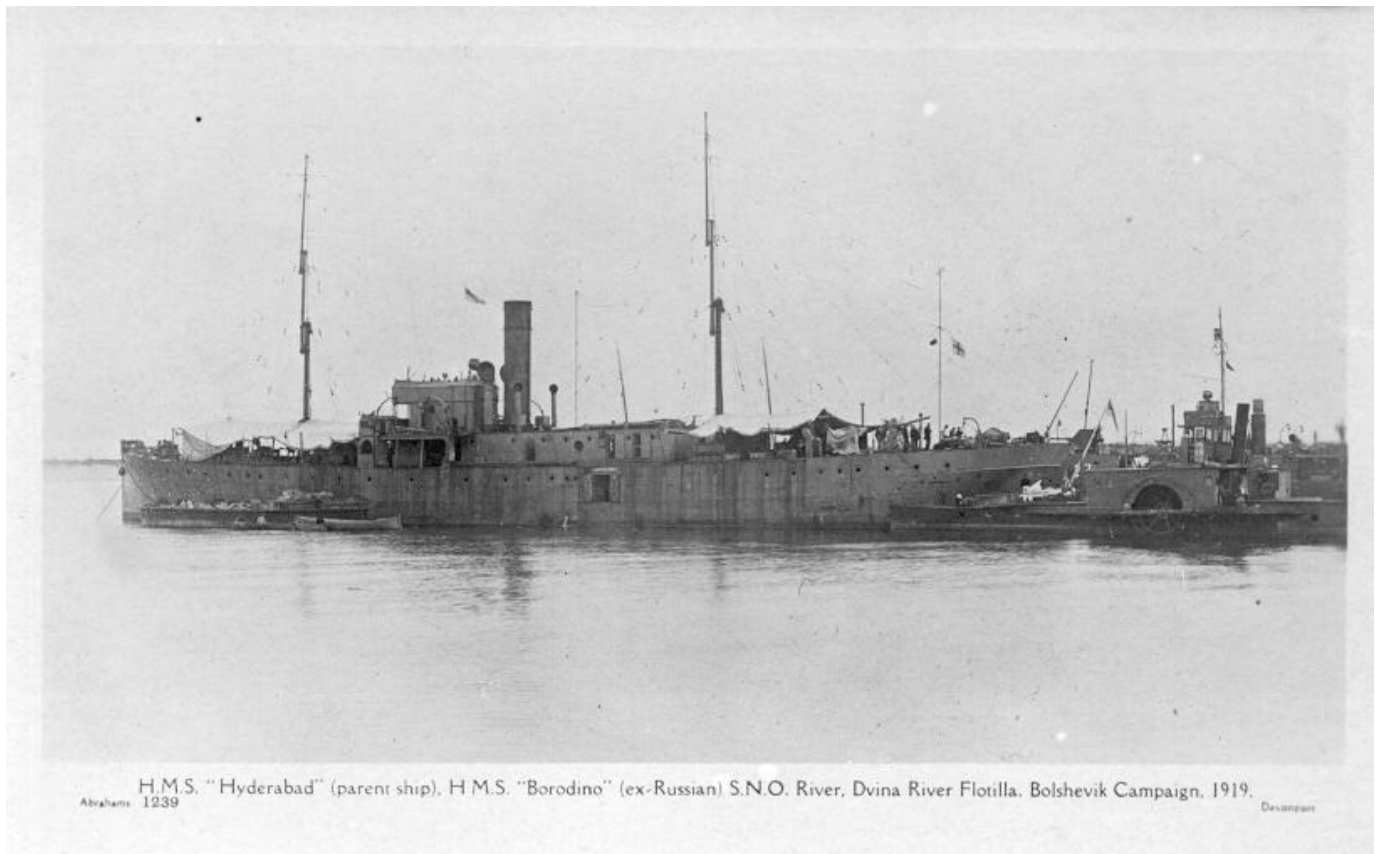
By 6th May the first of the monitors, presently under the command of Cmdr Sebald W. B. Green prior to Altham's arrival, nosed it's way gingerly upstream through a channel specially dynamited for it through the ice. Days later two Insect class gunboats followed and the situation around Toulgas was stabilised by the direct support they provided. Altham himself arrived in Murmansk on the 9th May and eventually took command of the flotilla on 3rd June.

By 26th May the ships carrying the first men of the two brigades of the "North Russian Relief Force" were approaching the now ice free mouth of the Dvina. Over the winter months, during which General Ironside's forces were holding the line, public sentiment and political will had shifted from overt help for the anti-Bolshevist forces to a desire for withdrawal of allied forces. Indeed it was only, the then minister for war, Winston Churchill's fervent anti-Bolshevist views and political skill which had managed to turn this public sentiment into a rallying call that resulted in the raising of these two brigades of volunteers so soon after the armistice. Even Churchill knew that this force was only temporarily assigned, though he planned to make as much use of it as he could in the time available and use it to spearhead an advance along the Dvina and attempt a junction with Admiral Kolchak's forces before it had then to withdraw. To this end Altham was informed that his "river armada" was to advance on Kotlas at once.

The naval preparations were now a race against time, as the river depths that far upstream were known to be very low from July to early September (the precise months of the projected operations). Whilst the lower Dvina would have an average depth of 4'1", on the upper section from Nikolski to Kotlas the depth would be as little as 3'9½". Even the lighter of the two monitors at Archangel drew 5'9", while the insect class gunboats drew 4'. Only the Dance class tunnel minesweepers that drew 3'6" could reasonably approach Kotlas without certain grounding. The main hopes for supporting operations this far upstream were therefore pinned upon the use of shallow draft barges and lighters if suitable guns could be found and mounted on them in time. However between the claims of the water-transport service and the inability of the base repair ship to undertake the work, not one of these gun barges ever materialised. Instead the river flotilla improvised and endeavoured to reduce the draught of their existing vessels as best they could.

Altham's river armada was by this time made up of the following:

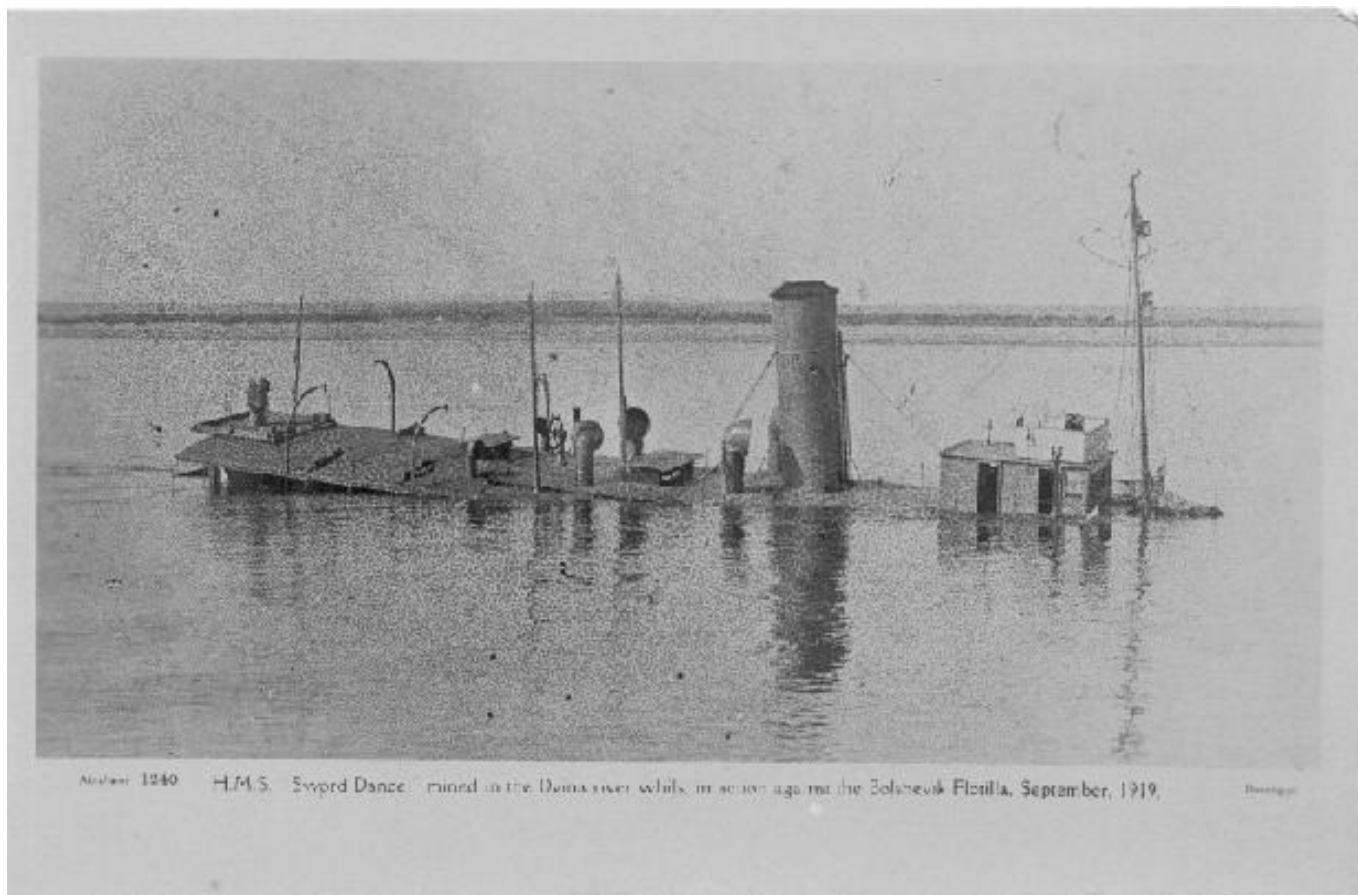
- Large river monitor : *Humber* (1260 tons, 9½ knots, 2x6" Mk XIV, 1x6" Mk VII , 2x4.7" how, 4x3" AA, 6xMG)
- Small river monitors : *M23, M25* (540 tons, 11 knots, 1x7.5", 1x3" AA, 1x12pdr, 2x3pdr)
- Small river monitor : *M27* (540 tons, 11 knots, 3x4" Mk IX, 2x3" AA, 2x3pdr)
- Small river monitors : *M31, M33* (355 tons, 9 knots, 2x6" Mk XII, 1x3" AA)
- Insect class river gunboats : *Cicala, Moth, Cricket, Cockchafer, Glow-worm* (645 tons, 14 knots, 2x6" Mk II, 2x12pdr, 6xMG)
- Dance class tunnel minesweepers : *Step Dance, Fandango, Sword Dance, Morris Dance* (290 tons, 9½ knots, 1x6pdr)
- Requisitioned paddle steamer : *Borodino*
- 55' Coastal Motor boats : *CMB 35, CMB 36, CMB 77, CMB 86* (11 tons, 35 knots, 1or2x18" torpedoes, 4xMG, 4xDCs)
- Base ship : *Hyderabad*



H.M.S. "Hyderabad" (parent ship), H.M.S. "Borodino" (ex-Russian) S.N.O. River, Dvina River Flotilla, Bolshevik Campaign, 1919.
Abraham 1239 Devanagar

Initially operations were conducted with the deeper draught monitors in the lead as the shallow draught gunboats needed to be kept in reserve for operations further up river. On 19th June an operation was launched to capture the high ground between Topsa and Troitsa, the flotilla co-operating with Graham's brigade. HMS *Cockchafer* (Lt Cmdr Preston-Thomas RN) did particularly good work in getting up the narrow Kurgomin channel within a mile of Topsa both supporting the assault and helping to repulse a counter attack. HMS *Glow-worm* (Cmdr Green RN) and HMS *Humber*, M27 and M33 were actively engaged with the Bolo gunboats in the main river. This brought the flotilla to the edge of the enemy minefield, and for the next week minesweeping had to be carried out under very difficult conditions; the river levels were falling and the water was so thick that it was impossible to see to any appreciable depth, even from a seaplane. It was necessary to explore channels with small steam-boats, clear mines where discovered, buoy them, and then send up the Dance class minesweepers to sweep up the heavier and deeper moored mines. All this had to be done within range of the enemy flotilla. They were under fire from their guns daily and even at times under direct machine gun and rifle fire.

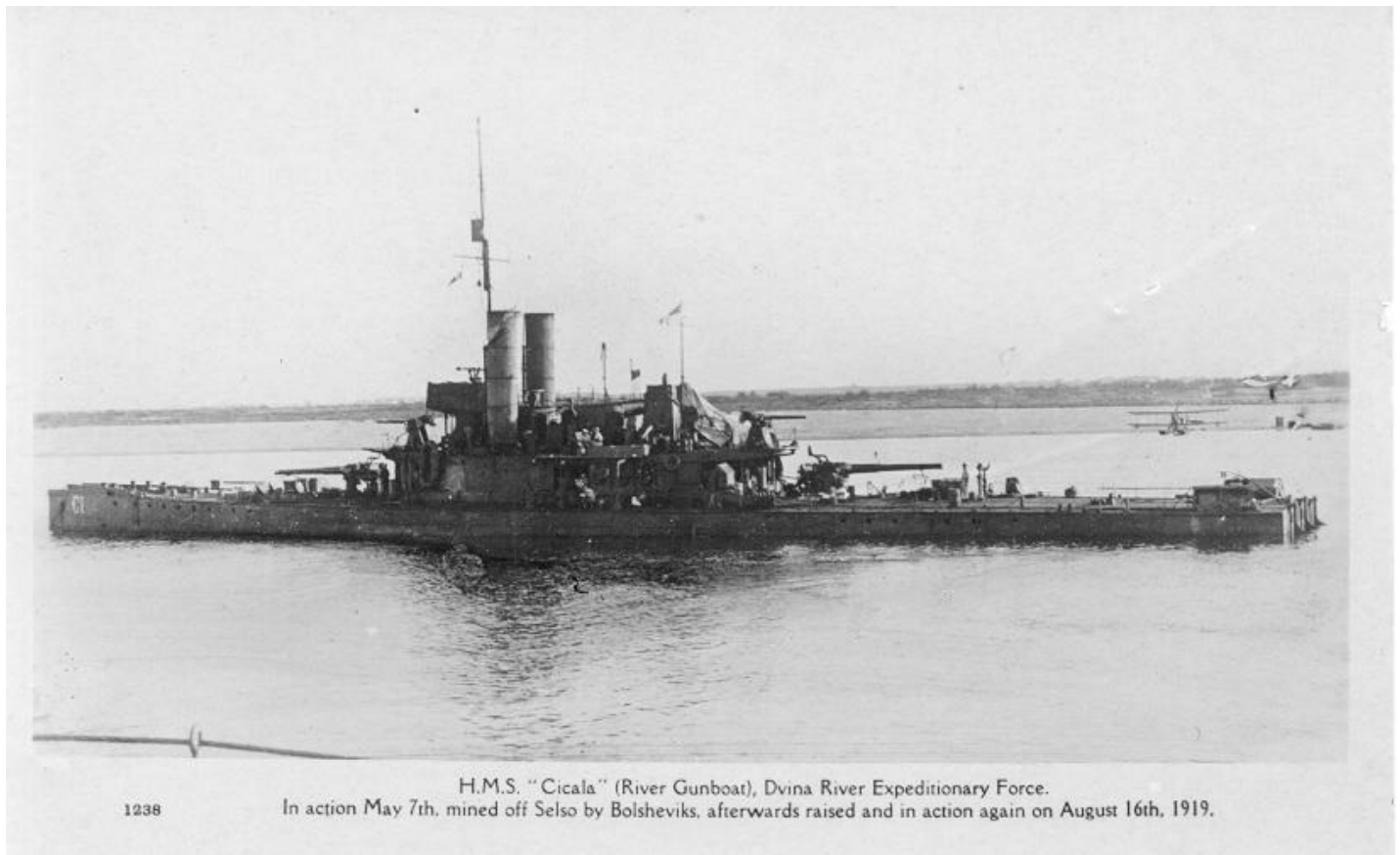
By 27th June a passage had been swept to Troitsa and HMS *Cricket* (Lt White RN) ran through a heavy barrage from the enemy guns and arrived under the high cliffs by Troitsa which provided some measure of protection. The following day the remainder of the flotilla and transports carrying the Brigade Headquarters followed after the British gunboats had driven back the Bolshevik flotilla with their gunfire. In the course of the minesweeping operations however both *Sword Dance* (Lt McC Halliley RN) and *Fandango* (Chief Boatswain Vosper RN) were mined and sunk with the loss of one rating killed from *Sword Dance* and one officer and seven ratings from *Fandango*.



On 7th July yet another mutiny broke out, this time in Dyers battalion, and the disaffection spread to the 4th North Russian rifles. Fifty seamen and a small detachment of Royal marines, under the command of Lt Sergeant (RM), were landed at Troitsa to assist in securing the position until the arrival of more British troops. The Bolsheviks were well aware of the mutiny and on the night of 7th – 8th July, launched an attack on Troitsa supported by the river flotilla. The situation looked precarious as the re-enforcements had not yet arrived and the Bolshevik forces had closed to within 1,200 yards of the British flotilla's anchorage and seaplane base.

The flotilla's gunboats and Seaplanes were just about holding the Bolshevik advance in check until the seaplanes (together with the flotilla's auxiliary craft) had to be withdrawn. It was only the timely arrival of HMS *Humber* (Lt-Comdr Johnstone RN), that had till then been covering Topsa, which halted and turned back the Bolshevik flotilla with rapid and accurate fire from her twin 6-inch gun mount. HM M33 had been hit by a heavy shell, fortunately without casualties as the shell only destroyed the ward room. HMS *Cicala* (Lt Grayston RN) developed defects whilst in action and was relieved by HMS *Cricket*. *Cricket* immediately came under heavy machine gun fire from the woods in the vicinity of Selmenga to which she replied with her own machine guns and continued up-river to engage the Bolshevik flotilla. In the afternoon HMS *Cricket* was hit on the water line by a 5.9 inch shell and had to come back down river and secure alongside a repair barge to patch up the damage.

As there was still no sign of the British re-enforcements, *Borodino* and the rest of the flotilla's paddle-steamers were dispatched to assist in bringing them up. They arrived on the morning of 9th July and stabilised the position.



HMS Cicala on the Dvina - note the CI designation painted on the bows and the sea planes in the background

An advance on Gorodok, Borok and Selmenga on the right bank and Seltso and Nijni Seltso on the left was planned for 10th August by the Sadlier-Jackson brigade. In preparation monitor M33 had moved forward on the afternoon of the 9th but the Bolos spotted her and brought forward a couple of artillery pieces and opened fire on her with 2x4.2" guns. Within a few minutes M33 had been hit, so she started to get underway to shift her position, but was hit again before she could do so. Damage was sufficient to necessitate her retirement to the flotilla anchorage. Her place in the advanced position was taken by one of the other M class monitors. During the night she too was shelled and although near missed was not hit but still felt compelled to shifted her position.

The attack was timed to co-inside with flank marches on both the left and right banks. By 11:00 all columns were in their assembly positions, so at 12 noon on the 10th the attack began. The main attacks were directed at Borok and Seltso, HMS *Humber*, M27, M31 and M33 providing artillery support to the Borok attack, which was instrumental in breaking the defence, assisted by Seaplanes for both spotting and bombing. A kite balloon tethered to a barge was also used to spot fall of shot. HMS *Humber*, assisted by HMS *Cicala*, then engaged the Bolshevik gunboats which soon retired, one with a pronounced list. CMBs were also employed to break up, with their machine guns, Bolshevik infantry gathering on the left bank for a counter attack. Seaplane operations were however severely restricted by mist and rain. All of the allied objectives were eventually taken following a stubborn and well co-ordinated defence by Bolshevik Russian, Red Finn and German troops, pushing back the Bolshevik forces ten miles and either killing capturing or dispersing six Bolshevik battalions, capturing 2000 prisoners, eighteen field guns and large quantities of small arms and ammunition.

An extensive minefield was discovered off Seltso, and a passage begun to be cleared for transport up to Nijni Seltso, however during the sweeping of the passage one of the steam boats used was mined and sunk, killing Lt McLaughlin RN and the sweeping was stopped. The mines now precluded sending mine laying craft above Seltso to guard against the Bolshevik flotilla which had been active in providing fire support for their own ground forces, but fifteen small "whisker" mines that had been floated down river by the Bolos were transported over land and deployed in the river in defence of the newly won allied positions.

This operation marked the high water mark of the allied advance. The river was now extensively mined, the forward positions handed over to white Russian forces and the river flotilla withdrawn to Archangel. This last task proved more problematic than might at first be thought as the river levels had been steadily

dropping and neither *M25*, *M27* nor the yacht *Kathleen* were able to navigate their way back downstream over the Dvina's sand bars due to the depth of their draught and all three had eventually to be scuttled and abandoned. Even those boats of the flotilla that were able to navigate the falling river often had to remove heavy guns, mountings, ammunition, stores and in some cases even main engines in order to lighten the vessel sufficiently to pass through channels either dynamited or dredged through the sand bars. HMS *Humber* only managed to navigate her way over the sandbars by removing much of its armour, including all of her 3" belt armour, estimated to weigh 70 tons, which took the ships crew two whole weeks to remove.



During the withdrawal "C" company of 46th Royal Fusiliers² found itself stranded at Shushega with no means of getting itself away, so an operation was mounted to extract them. They first had to ferry themselves by small boats to a nearby island in the Dvina, then fast moving tugs towing barges embarked them from the island and proceeded downstream escorted by a gun barge mounting 2x18pdrs, an armed naval launch and a number of CMBs. The convoy had to run the gauntlet of Bolo fire off Bereznik at the confluence of the Dvina and Varga but came through unscathed. Luckily they were not harassed by the Bolo flotilla during their journey and they made it safely back to Archangel.

The final evacuation of the allies from Archangel took place on September 27th 1919, the British and French governments leaving only limited supplies of food and war materiel for their erstwhile Russian allies with which to carry on the resistance and keep the population fed over the winter. General Miller and his White Russian forces did not immediately collapse following the allied withdrawal however, but neither were the Bolshevik's in a hurry to crush them now that the allies had departed, instead diverting forces further south and east where they were more urgently needed to defeat Denikin and Kolchak. In the end though their collapse was inevitable as desertion and mutiny caused Miller's white Russian army simply to disintegrate.

² 46th Fusiliers were led by Major A.E. Percival who two decades later was to achieve notoriety when commanding the Army of Malaya which surrendered Singapore to the Japanese.



M33 as she is today at Portsmouth Historic dockyard dry dock No 1

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Other information kindly provided by members of the Yahoo Russian Civil War discussion group.