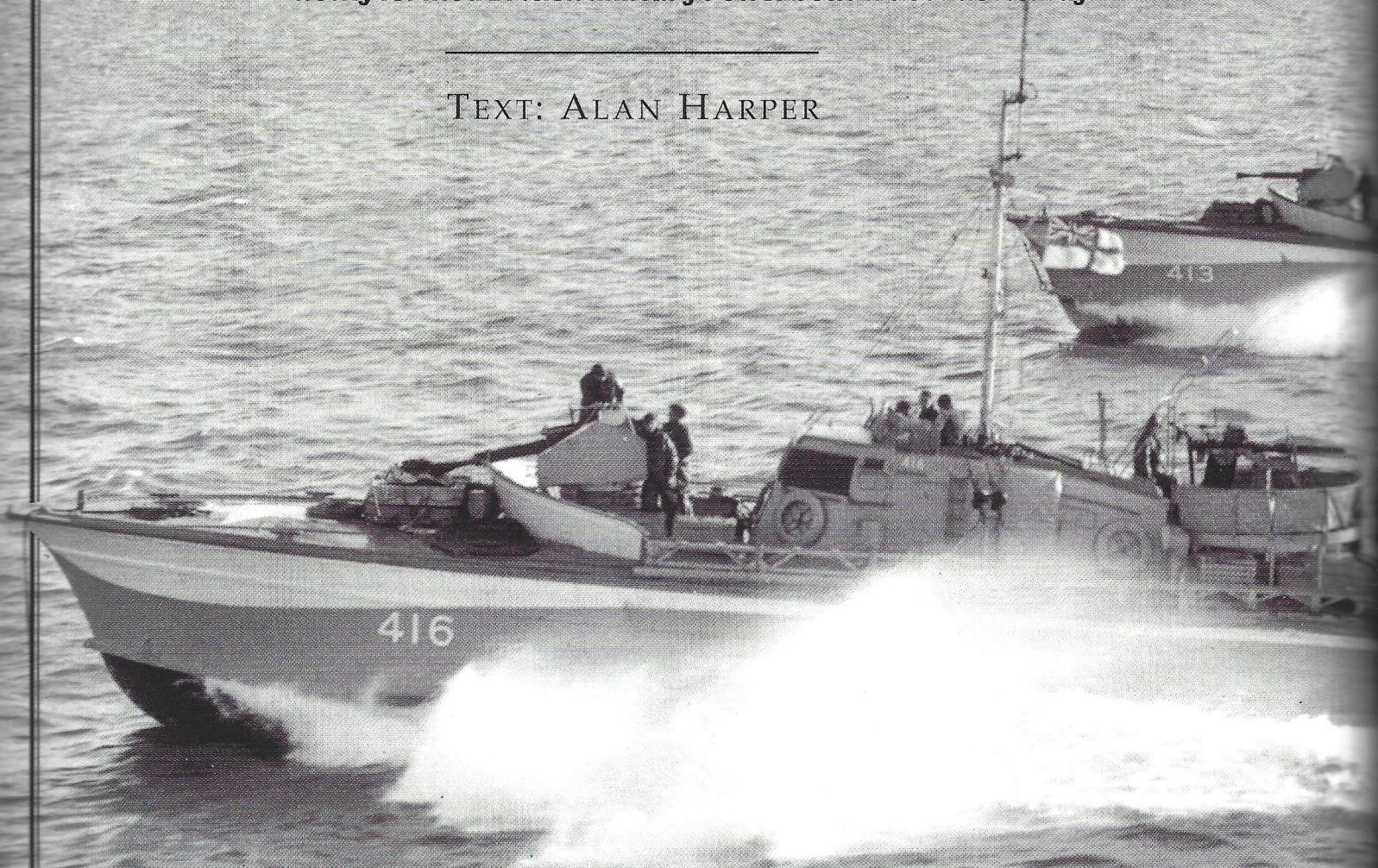


T

hey shouldn't be allowed to rot, these gallant little plywood warships. Thousands were built and few remain: a rapidly dwindling band of boats whose contribution to history might be neglected but isn't forgotten - and will soon be celebrated if the newly formed British Military Powerboat Trust has its way

TEXT: ALAN HARPER



WOOD
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Homeward bound, June 12, 1944: MTB 416 (ex-MGB 81) and others from the 1st Flotilla return across the Channel from a night patrol off Cherbourg.

"WE WERE ALL INEXPERIENCED AND THE HEIGHT OF THE sea was hard to judge. On we sped until, suddenly, we reached the top of the first big swell. It was a breathtaking sensation as we dropped off it; the boats fell so sharply that men were left two feet in the air... We were all pretty startled. Throttles were brought down and the unit slowly pulled itself together at about 20 knots...."

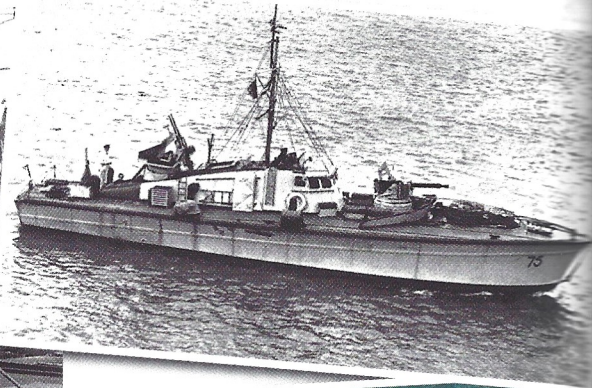
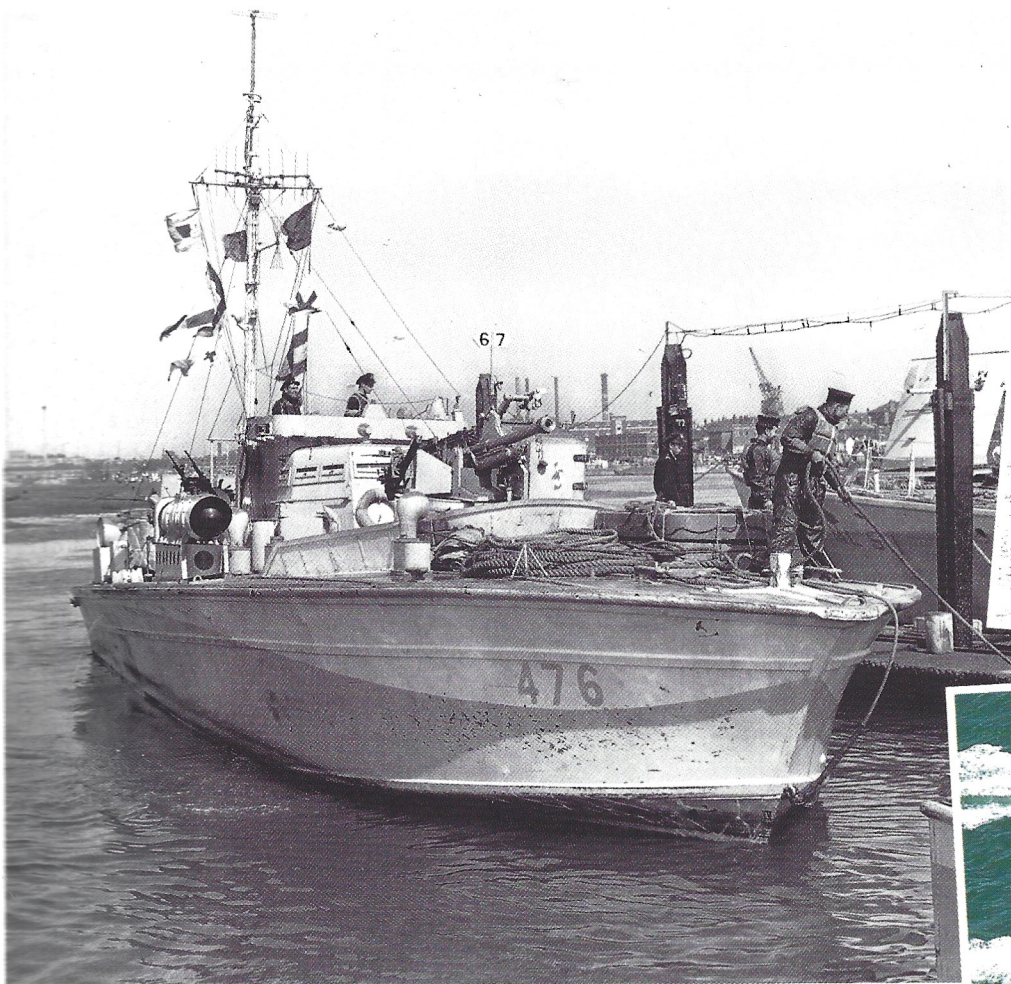
"The wind had risen to almost gale force, at least 7 or 8; with the effect of the race on the sea, there were some very sharp and, for us, large waves. We jumped through them like porpoises, at one moment entirely hidden from each other by the crest of a wave or by solid sheets of spray, at another exposed to view well down to the under belly of the ship, with a third of the boat's keel forward clear of the water. Slowly, as we plunged and thrust across West Bay, my admiration for the sea qualities of these little boats grew and grew."

A 70ft (21m) boat with three Napier Lion engines is hardly little, but in 1940, to an RNVR lieutenant like Robert Hichens – in real life a solicitor – this was an entirely new breed of fighting ship.

The 70-footer in question was a 'whaleback', originally designed by George Selman as a private venture for Hubert Scott-Paine's British Power Boat Co of Hythe, near Southampton. In a battle for orders with the Admiralty, which was looking for a 'standard' 70ft motor torpedo boat, Scott-Paine had famously pitched his prototype PV70, as she was known, against Vosper's 68-footer. He lost, but sold the concept to the Americans and by 1940 was delivering the hulls to the Royal Navy too, fitted out first as anti-submarine vessels (MA/SBs)

MINI SUBMARINE UNDERERS

Left: Gosport, August 15, 1944 – a Mk VI 71ft 6in (21.79m) gunboat returns from patrol.
Below: a Mk V, from the same batch as 81.
Bottom: RAF 206 and HSL 102.



and then as gunboats (MGBs). The distinctive sheer, so beloved of Scott-Paine himself, was the design's achilles' heel: Selman never liked it, and told Scott-Paine exactly where it would crack under stress. He was right. A stronger hull was needed to carry heavier armament to counter the German E-boats, and as Scott-Paine was in the US in late 1940, the Navy turned direct to Selman for a new design.

It turned out to be his masterpiece. Without fundamentally altering the underwater shape of the 70, Selman drew a new hull 71ft 6in (21.79m) long, with a subtly reversed sheer and strong internal stiffening and reinforcement consisting of six fore-and-aft bottom girders, two full-height longitudinal bulkheads below the foredeck to support the 40mm gun, double-diagonal planking above the chine and triple below.

Although in concept and execution the new gunboat owed everything to Scott-Paine's ideas and production methods, it was the first British Power Boat Co project that he had not overseen, and he was not happy. "I cannot possibly agree to any major design being contemplated [unless] I have been able to fully investigate same," he had written to Selman from across the Atlantic. Seeing the plans did nothing to allay his disquiet. Of the 40mm mounting he wrote again to Selman: "A worse place could not have been chosen for it... Having lifted the chine and put this weight there you will have a deeper rising and trimming hull. The whole thing is a pity."

The 71ft 6in (21.79m)

gunboat was designed to a Navy requirement for a top speed of over 40 knots, and to maintain 30 knots in 8ft waves or 20 knots in 20ft waves. Some 96 were built. None ever developed a structural defect, and they were acknowledged to be the finest of all the Navy's 'short' coastal forces boats.

THE MGB 81/MTB 416 STORY

The British Military Powerboat Trust's first major project was one of the first eight 71ft 6in motor gun boats to be delivered. MGB 81

The British Military Powerboat Trust

The Clabburns' superb privately restored RAF 206 and HSL 102 provided the inspiration for the British Military Powerboat Trust, which was formed early last year to raise funds to save similar vessels from the ravages of age and neglect.

Thousands of these wooden 'expendables' were built before and during both world wars, and they served with all three branches of the services. Such yards as Camper & Nicholsons, Samuel White and Thornycroft all built them, as well as Vosper and British Power Boats, whose designs set the standard for Allied navies' coastal forces.

The recent sad demise of Husband's Shipyard at Cracknore Hard, Southampton

Water, and the site's disposal for redevelopment has provided the Trust with an opportunity to acquire a permanent base. With the blessing of the developers, in due course the old sheds will be rebuilt and a working museum and visitor centre constructed. In every possible case the object of the Trust's restoration projects will be to return the boats to fully operational condition and run them as living craft rather than conserve them as static exhibits.

Following the acquisition of MGB 81, the Trust was given ST 1502, a 41ft 6in (12.50m) RAF



seaplane tender from 1942. The Trust's other boats are the 44ft 6in (13.56m) army 'Rivers' Class Humber, a 12ft 6in (3.80m) army radio-controlled target boat, and a 23ft 6in (7.16m) aluminium

wartime attack craft (believed to be German). Hampshire County Council has transferred its two World War II boats to the trust: the 60ft (18.2m) Vosper MTB 71 and the 55ft (16.7m) Coastal Motor Boat CMB 331. Contact: Military Powerboat Trust, PO Box 165, Lymington, Hants SO41 0BP. Registered charity no: 1072916.

– later re-designated MTB 416, though never fitted with torpedo tubes – was laid down at the Hythe boatyard in December 1941 and accepted by Sub Lt J. A. Cowley of the Royal Navy on July 11, 1942. After working up at Weymouth she joined the eight-boat 8th MGB Flotilla at Dartmouth in August, under Lt Cdr Robert Hichens – who, with his experience of the 70, had been brought in to advise George Selman on the new gunboats' design.

Almost immediately 81 was in action off Guernsey with three of her comrades, including Hichens' MGB 77, against two armed German trawlers. She was in the thick of it on eight further occasions, and with the flotilla – renamed the 1st MTB Flotilla in September 1943 – she served at Felixtowe, Gosport and Lowestoft as well as Dartmouth.

*Then and now:
MTB 416 (ex-
MGB 81) returns
from patrol; the
hull today.*

She suffered battle damage four times, once in a skirmish alongside MTB 414 (ex-MGB 77) against five E-boats in Lyme Bay, having been vectored successfully

towards them by shore-based radar – a first for the Kingswear Controller. In June and July 1944 she served off the Normandy beaches, and in action against a convoy off Cherbourg on the night of June 23, one of her crew, Able Seaman D. Simpson, was killed.

The Admiralty disposed of her in late 1945 and she passed through the hands of a succession of private owners – one a smuggler, caught at Shoreham in 1958 – and on the way lost her engines and shafts to a Gosport scrap dealer. After service as a barge for a Gosport sailing school and as a houseboat she found her way into the care of Guy and Art Webster on the Hamble, who started restoring her to her wartime appearance.

By 1998 discussions were under way which would lead to the

formation of the British Military Powerboat Trust. To secure the future of MGB 81, the best surviving example of her type, Powerboat Restorations bought her from the Websters on the Trust's behalf, and after showing her off at the MBY Festival of Power in Cowes in August, moved her across Southampton Water to Marchwood. And there she sits now, in the care of the Trust as its first major project. Restoration work is well under way.

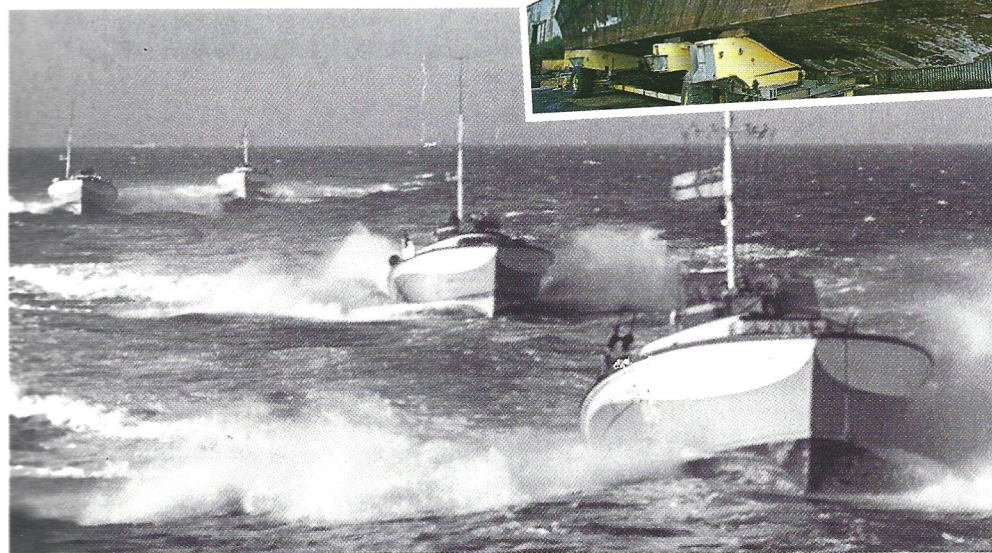
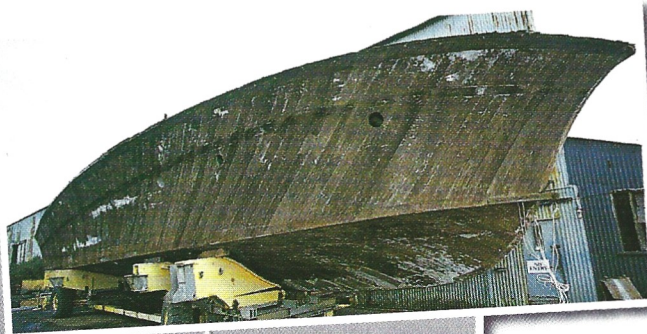
MGB 81 TODAY

Phil Clabburn of Powerboat Restorations is bullish about the condition of the hull. "She's in far better shape than HSL 102 was," he confirms. "The frames are generally intact – there's 70 or 80, but I'd be surprised if we had to replace any. And now we've stripped the bottom back, it looks like it was planked yesterday."

The transom is also sound, and the topsides are "generally OK". The bulkheads are intact, although some have been cut through during past conversions. The deck needs replacing, but the deck beams are in reasonable shape.

The object of the restoration is to return MGB 81 as near as possible to how she looked, inside and out, on the day she was handed over to the Navy.

Replica or decommissioned armament is relatively easy to procure. Packard V12s are not difficult to come by either, but there are no plans to re-power MGB 81 with petrol engines: she would be too expensive to run. But since the boat will weigh in at well under her service displacement, it is estimated that three 800hp diesels will give her the necessary performance. Using diesel will also mean that a fuel capacity of less than half her service tankage will still allow for a good cruising range – and save more weight. **MBY**



BPBCo 71ft 6in MGB/MTB (Mk V)

Data

LOA	71ft 9in (21.80m) inc fendering
Beam	20ft 7in (6.28m)
Draught	5ft 9in (1.75m)
Displacement	37.0 tons (light) 46.6 tons (loaded)
Fuel capacity	2,800 imp gal (12,730lt)
Engines	3 × Packard 4M-2500, 1,250hp @ 2,400rpm; V12-cylinder 40.8lt petrol; 1:1 gearbox ratio; centre engine direct, wing engines on V-drives; 3-bladed props, 32in (813mm) diameter
Maximum speed	40 knots+ @ 2,400rpm
Max continuous	35 knots @ 2,000rpm
Range	475 miles @ 35 knots 550 miles @ 20 knots 600 miles @ 15 knots
Armament	1 × 40mm Vickers 2pdr pom-pom 1 × twin 20mm Oerlikon 2 × twin .303 Lewis or Vickers 2 × Mk VII depth charges

