



Drama on the high seas: Shooters and Monmouth slug it out. Top left: Capt Tony Long has a go on the Princess while Steve Thornton looks on.



A piece of the action

IT WAS HARDLY A FAIR FIGHT – A PRINCESS V48 AGAINST A ROYAL NAVY FRIGATE – BUT IT WAS FUN WHILE IT LASTED Words • Brendan Lewis

It was when I heard the sound signals that I realised we were never going to win against these people. They were just too calm, too professional, too well trained – in a word, too good for us. A fully-manned warship exploring the very limits of her handling capabilities, her machinery under extreme duress, was calmly using the horn to indicate her intentions – one blast for starboard, two blasts for port. Each time her helm was thrown over, her propellers thrashed the water to a furious boil, her rudders strained for grip as the stern swung round, and she heeled until it seemed her side decks must go under. Lining her guardrails, imperturbable young Royal Navy matelots, male and female, manned an arsenal of machine guns and loosed them off at us with a veritable hailstorm of hot, lethal and thankfully

imaginary metal. And all the while, a fearsome 4.5-inch gun on the bow kept us in disdainful view, just in case. We didn't stand a chance. It had seemed like a good idea at the time. Princess's home town of Plymouth is a naval city – so when the phone rang in the local office of Princess Motor Yacht Sales, there was no hesitation. Do you want to come and play? Then report to position 50°18'N, 004°20'W at 13.45 hours, and await instructions. Thursday War breaks out in the English Channel off Plymouth every Thursday. As home to FOST – Flag Officer Sea Training – the base is responsible for organising exercises designed to hone a ship's effectiveness, and weld its crew into a

cohesive unit, ready to do whatever is required – including fight, if necessary. Crews coming together for the first time on brand new ships, or ships fresh out of refit, are put through a gruelling, eight-week 'basic operational sea training' course. Ships posted on operations return to Plymouth before they go, for a two-week, 'theatre specific' refresher. FOST is recognised as so demanding and effective that foreign navies from all over Europe, and as far afield as Turkey and South Africa, regularly send their ships to Plymouth for training. They practice disaster relief and humanitarian assistance, going to the aid of villagers stricken by floods or hurricanes. FOST staff make it as realistic as possible – there is a 'disaster village' on the base, complete with ruined buildings, smoke and burst ➤



Jon Hinchcliffe keeps an eye on the Marines boarding party from the Princess, with Monmouth behind.



Quick and efficient – the Royal Marines in action. Below: Capt Long photographs his ship.



LET BATTLE COMMENCE		
	SHOOTERS – PRINCESS V48	HMS MONMOUTH – TYPE 23 FRIGATE
Length overall	49ft 1in (14.96m)	436ft 4in (133.00m)
Beam	13ft 2in (4.01m)	52ft 10in (16.10m)
Draught (max)	3ft 6in (1.07m)	18ft 0in (5.50m)
Displacement (max)	14 tonnes	4,200 tonnes
Berths	4	185
Engines	2 x 575mhp Volvo D9 diesel inboards	2 x 18,570hp Rolls-Royce Spey gas turbines
Performance	38 knots max	28 knots max

Missiles and submarines are seen as a bit Cold War these days. Pirates and suicide bombers are the new threats to train against – innocent looking fishing boats or pleasure craft

water pipes, and populated by 'acting casualties'. Ships' media officers issue press releases, and make-believe journalists ask awkward questions. The brief is to portray the Royal Navy in a positive light. "The warship has broken off from her duties in support of the UN exclusion zone around Ginger and Brownia to render humanitarian assistance to the 50-strong local population..." All very convincing, but completely made up.

Most of all, FOST is known for its ability to conjure a war out of thin air – realistic conflicts against real submarines, real aircraft and real ships, manned by crews who are going through exactly the same ordeal. Just as the threat appears on the sonar screen or the radar, requiring snap decisions about what it is and how to deal with it, the lights fail in the operations room or the bridge fills with smoke. In battle, things can go wrong – and FOST examiners are there to make sure that they do, every Thursday.

"Short of fighting an actual war, FOST's version is the next worst thing," said one officer. "You work eighteen-hour days, grab meals at actions stations, and don't know what's going to happen next – it's stressful." After eight weeks of training and eight consecutive Thursday Wars, crews know their ship, and each other, inside out. They're completely exhausted – but ready for anything.

The Black Duke

While it's still important to know how to deal with sea-skimming missiles and submarines, such exercises are seen as a bit Cold War these days, when the most dangerous naval deployments are to hot places where there's plenty of motivation for causing mayhem, but little high-grade weaponry. Pirates and suicide bombers are the new threats to train against – innocent looking fishing boats or pleasure craft which might suddenly turn against you.

This was where we came in. Clearly a Princess V48 would never be used in such an underhand manner, but for the sake of simulation it was Princess Yachts chairman David King's own boat, *Shooters*, which was volunteered for duty by the PMYS Plymouth crew, represented by Steve Thornton and Dave Boardman. Also on board we had Leading Seaman Jonathan Hinchcliffe, a Royal Navy senior rating with years of sea

time behind him, now seconded to FOST. With clipboard and VHF radio, he was our liaison between the various vessels in the exercise.

Our adversary this Thursday was HMS *Monmouth*, a Type 23 frigate that wears a black crown on her funnel and a black flag at her mast. Her namesake was executed and his coat of arms blacked out after he attempted to depose the catholic King James II.

That was in 1685, but she was built in 1993 by Yarrows on the Clyde, one of 16 'Duke' class vessels – potent, general-purpose warships that form the backbone of the RN fleet, with anti-aircraft and anti-ship missiles, a stealthy design with minimal vertical surfaces, a hybrid propulsion system, a gun on the bow and big helicopter in the hangar at the stern.

Role playing

Position 50°18'N, 004°20'W is in Whitsand Bay, a few miles west of the entrance to Plymouth Sound. Our first role was to be a victim – an innocent Omani-registered tug, complete with a convincing set of paperwork, being harassed by a pirate skiff, in the form of the fast workboat *Smit Merrion*. A dark shape loomed on the horizon to the west, and two white splashes appeared alongside her, which soon materialised into fast RIBs, packed with heavily armed Royal Marines. The pirate skiff suddenly looked nervous.

"We send the Marines in first," Hinchcliffe explained. "The idea is that they make the area safe, and then a Navy crew goes on board to search, check paperwork and interrogate." No detail is too small for FOST. Names on the ship's manifest might not match the crew's ID cards. A vessel supposedly fishing might lack fishing equipment – or fish. "We're training them to spot irregularities, and look out for anything that doesn't seem right," said Hinchcliffe.

Guns at the ready, the marines circled the suspicious vessel. As one boat stood off, the other put men aboard, disarmed the crew and took the skipper, hands aloft, to the bow. It was quick, quiet, efficient and professional – but it's not always like that. On a similar occasion recently, one boarding party from a European navy donned black masks, waved their guns about and did a lot of shouting before handcuffing the skipper to the guardrail. They were putting on ➡



Monmouth's massive Merlin helicopter ready for action. Below: launching one of her Pacific 22 RIBs.

The young sailors looked down their gun barrels at us and calmly opened up. They were only firing blanks, but over the engine noise we could hear the guns chatter



rubber gloves for a full body search when Hinchcliffe intervened to remind them it was only a game.

By this time, the large, grey and intimidating shape of *Monmouth* had hove to a few hundred metres to seaward, and – a sign that the fun was about to start – her captain was coming across to the *Princess* in a RIB. "We're just finishing eight weeks of working up," he explained, taking off his helmet. "We've got one more Thursday War to go, and then she's operational." Commander Tony Long, 41, had been in charge of the ship for six months, and was due in a few days to take her to the Gulf. "Everyone is pretty tired," he said. "We train for every situation, but this is probably one of the more relevant."

Action stations

Hinchcliffe ordered us off to the north, to lose ourselves among the small craft inshore. Then we were to turn and accelerate towards the warship. At the helm, Steve pointed the *Princess*'s bows at the distant grey profile and pushed the throttle levers forward.

After a minute, a calmly authoritative voice came up on VHF channel 72: "Vessel approaching my position. This is Warship 235. Make your intentions clear." Steve checked the log and reached forward to make sure the throttle levers were fully home. The *Princess* skimmed at full speed over a calm sea. "Vessel approaching my position. Request you turn away," came the voice again. The V48 pounded as we entered the ship's wake zone. Spray dashed

against the windscreen and flashed over the top, bright white in the sunlight. Steve gripped the wheel while Dave, alongside him, hung on to the handrail. "This is pretty stable!" the captain exclaimed over the din. "What's our speed?" "Thirty-five knots," Steve called. We were closing the ship down.

"Vessel approaching my position. You appear to be a threat, and I may be forced to take action against you in self defence." Now *Monmouth* accelerated, her 4,000 tons visibly surging forward as the gas turbines responded, heeling over as she turned hard into the threat. As the captain on board the *Princess* snapped photos with his Nikon she heeled again, her coxswain applying full opposite lock. Steve did the same, cutting across the ship's wake and lining up for an attack on her starboard side.

The voice remained level. "Vessel approaching my position. You appear to be a threat, and I may be forced to open fire against you in self defence."

They didn't wait after that. We were within 100 metres, and the young sailors on the guardrails looked down their gun barrels at us and calmly opened up. They were only firing blanks, but over the engine noise and the slashing spray we could hear the guns chatter.

Within seconds, it is safe to assume, we were a flaming wreck, dead in the water. And as Steve wheeled the *Princess* past the frigate's bows, ready for the next attack, there it was – two steady blasts on the horn as she swung around to port. Solid seamanship, in the heat of battle – I knew then that we never stood a chance.

