

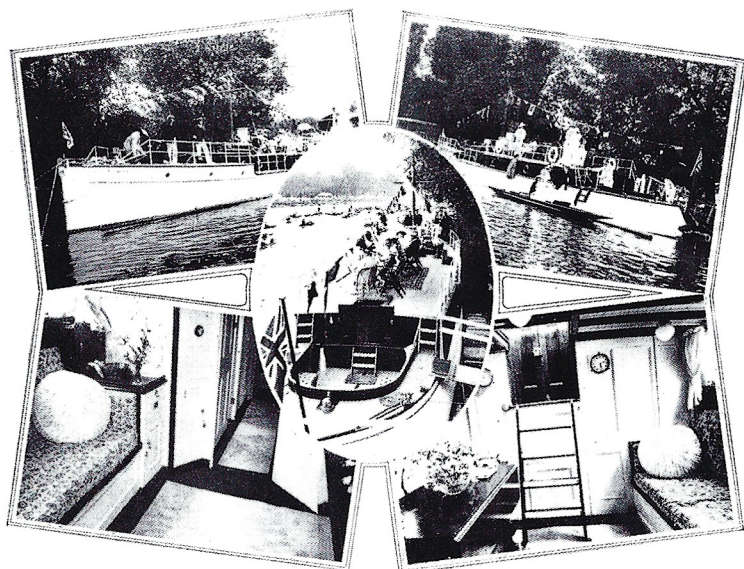
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Call to arms

Late in the evening of Tuesday, August 4, 1914, the small staff of *The Motor Boat* checked the last proofs of that week's issue and locked up the Rosebery Avenue offices – perhaps stopping in Farringdon Road for a celebratory drink on the way to the station. Overnight the magazine would be printed and bound, ready for distribution to the newstrade next day, and publication, as always, on the Thursday.

The team had good reason to feel pleased with themselves, for their title was thriving. Just a few weeks before, it had completed its first ten years, and intense public interest in the new sport of motor boating was reflected in healthy copy sales and strong advertising revenues. Racing boats had come of age with the perfection of hydroplane hull shapes, while engines were becoming ever lighter and more powerful. And it was with some satisfaction that the editorial team were now regularly able to feature new British-built motor yachts, rather than having to report on developments across the Atlantic.

Mayfair was one such. Built on the Hamble for Mr E. C. Hannen, she measured 80ft (24.38m) in



Views of Mayfair at Henley in 1914.

length on a 12ft 6in (3.81m) beam, and drawings showing her sleek, low profile had filled a page of the July 9 issue, accompanied by photographs showing the 150hp Thornycroft-engined yacht at that summer's Henley Regatta. A few weeks later the magazine was able to feature *Gelyce II*, a 60-footer (18.29m) built by Camper & Nicholson for their own use, its remarkably slender 7ft (2.13m) beam allowing a top speed of over 16 knots from just 60hp.

Wild Duck leading Flora at the start of the Erith to Cowes race.

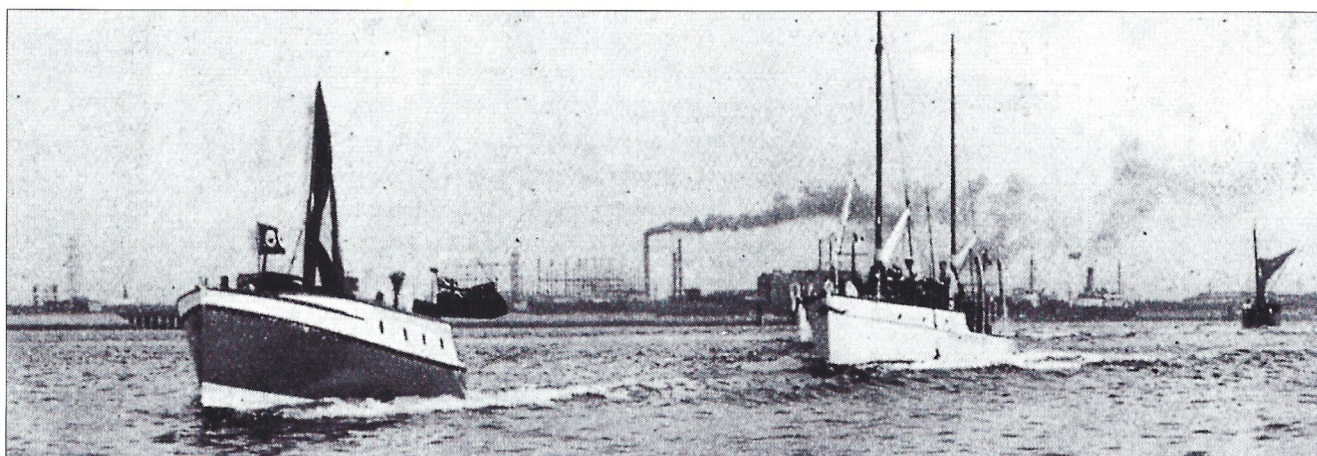
The enthusiasm of the owners of vessels like these knew no bounds. Even cruising boats raced each other. The Erith to Cowes handicap event that July saw *Mayfair* herself pitched against eight other substantial motor yachts on a 176-mile

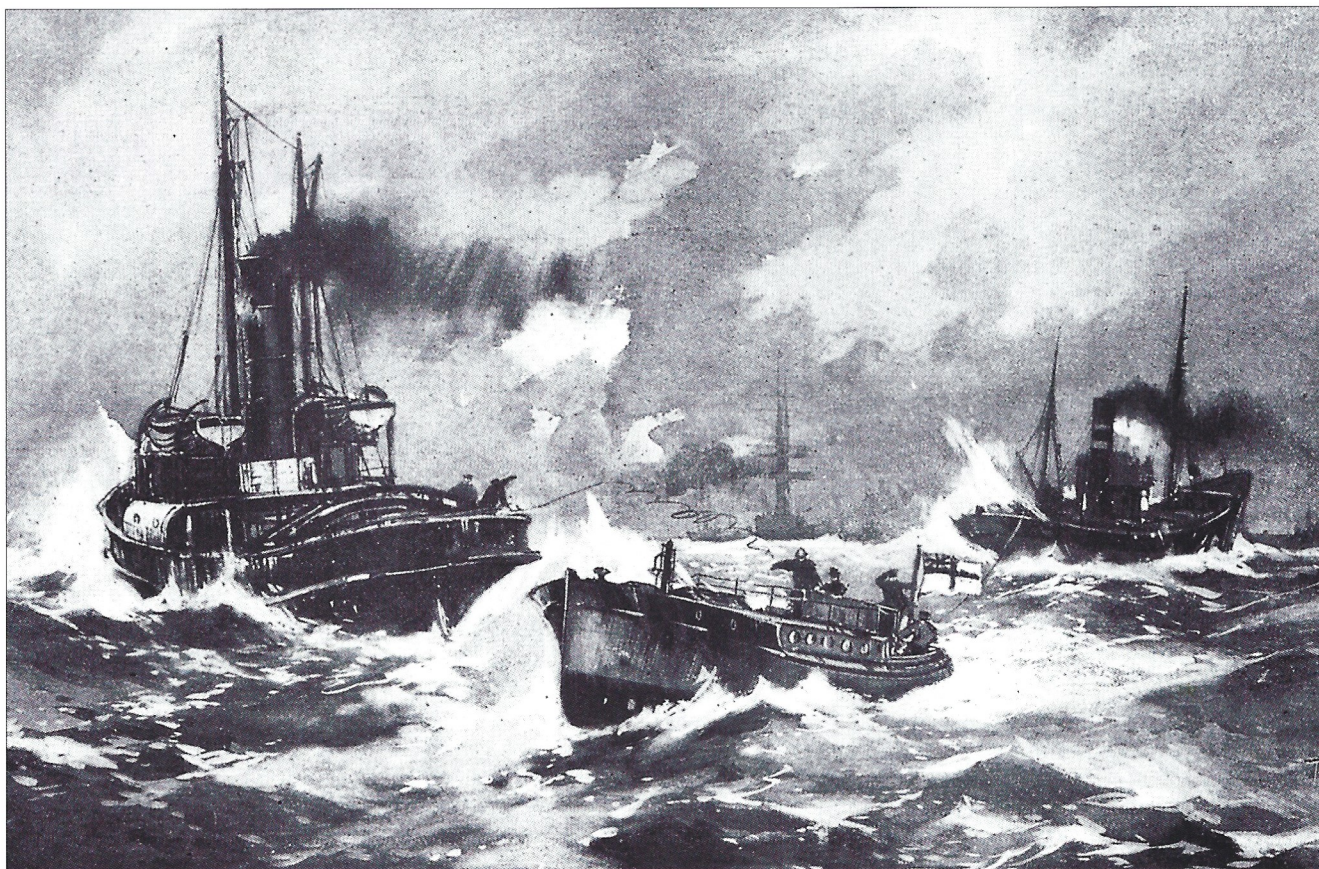
course, and although she put up a good showing she was beaten by Mr T. A. Comber's 53ft (16.16m) *Flora*, who took the trophy on corrected time, while G. E. Loder's *Wild Duck*, a 42ft (12.80m) 'cabin launch', took line honours at an average speed of 9.46 knots. The team from *The Motor Boat* were embarked on *Oomala*, which came in third.

Meanwhile, the hardline racing scene was at fever pitch that summer after two consecutive British victories in the Harmsworth Trophy by the 50-knot *Maple Leaf IV*. The next defence was scheduled for September in the Solent. New boats were frantically being prepared by wealthy owners and their teams. Just proofed and put to bed in the pages of the August 6 issue was a feature on *Batboat III*, a 25ft (7.62m) hydroplane built by Maynard's at Chiswick and recently sea-trialled in Southampton Water. "The motor is a six-cylinder Green," noted *The Motor Boat*. "On her first trial run she showed a speed of 44 knots, a very good performance after only a day's tuning."

But she was never to race. Neither were any of the others, for there was no Harmsworth Trophy meeting in the Solent that year, nor for some years to come. On Tuesday, August 4, as the editorial team were checking the last proofs of Thursday's issue, the British Government issued an ultimatum to Germany, set to expire at midnight. Europe's complex system of political alliances had ground into ponderous, unstoppable motion – and on Wednesday, the First World War began.

A population blissfully ignorant of trench warfare, mustard gas, aerial bombardment and U-boat blockades greeted the news with enthusiasm





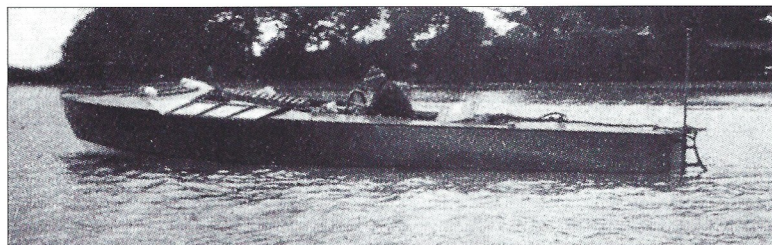
***Your country needs
you: the Motor Boat
Reserve assists a
grounded trawler.***

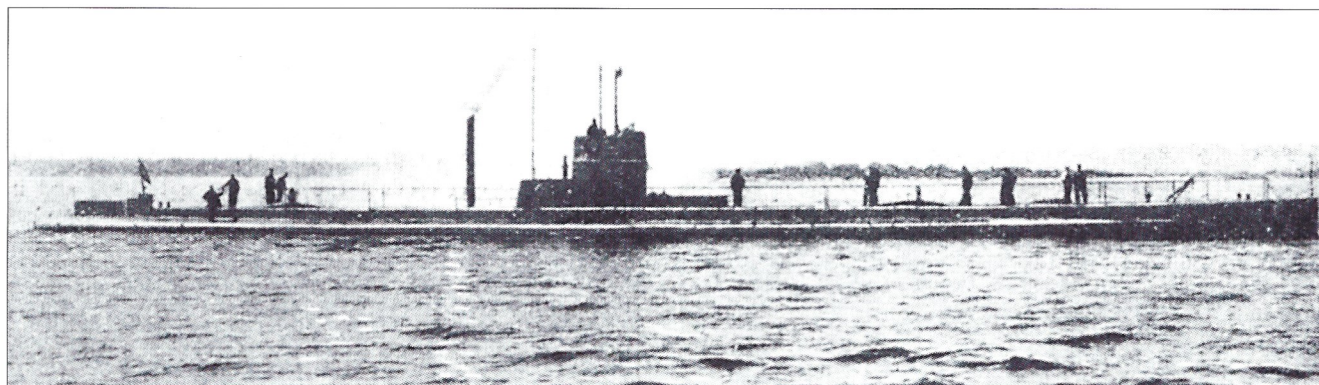
***Batboat III:
a 44-knot performer
whose progress
was interrupted by
the war.***

and song. Men young and old enlisted en masse. *The Motor Boat* swiftly caught the mood. "There are many owners of large and small motor vessels who are desirous of handing their boats over to the Admiralty, and also placing their own services at disposal for defence purposes," the magazine announced in its very next issue, introducing the RNVR Motor Boat Reserve. "This journal has for the last two or three years advocated the formation of a motor boat reserve in connection with the Admiralty," it reminded readers a fortnight later, "and it is noteworthy that at the time of need it has been possible in a few days to

equip and form an organisation that is of real value to the country." The Navy's preference seemed to be for cruisers of 32 to 60ft (9.75m-18.29m), and they ought to be painted grey, it advised. Carry as full a set of engine spares as possible, "as well as a supply of electric bulbs if the vessel is fitted with electric light. Vessels that are to be engaged on scouting work should advisedly be provided with a searchlight".

Though required to fly a white ensign, the motor boats of the Reserve were generally kept well out of harm's way during the conflict, although *The Motor Boat* remained loyally enthusiastic. A short news paragraph illustrated by a stirring, full-page watercolour in the issue of August 26, 1915, reported on a service "during recent heavy weather" when a trawler ran aground in "a certain estuary". A tug could not get close enough, so a motor boat of the Reserve was called to pass a line between them, which it managed to do. "Under the conditions which prevailed, the job proved a tricky one, and was not





Naval gazing: a German U20 class submarine.

completed without a pretty severe buffeting to the small motor boat.”

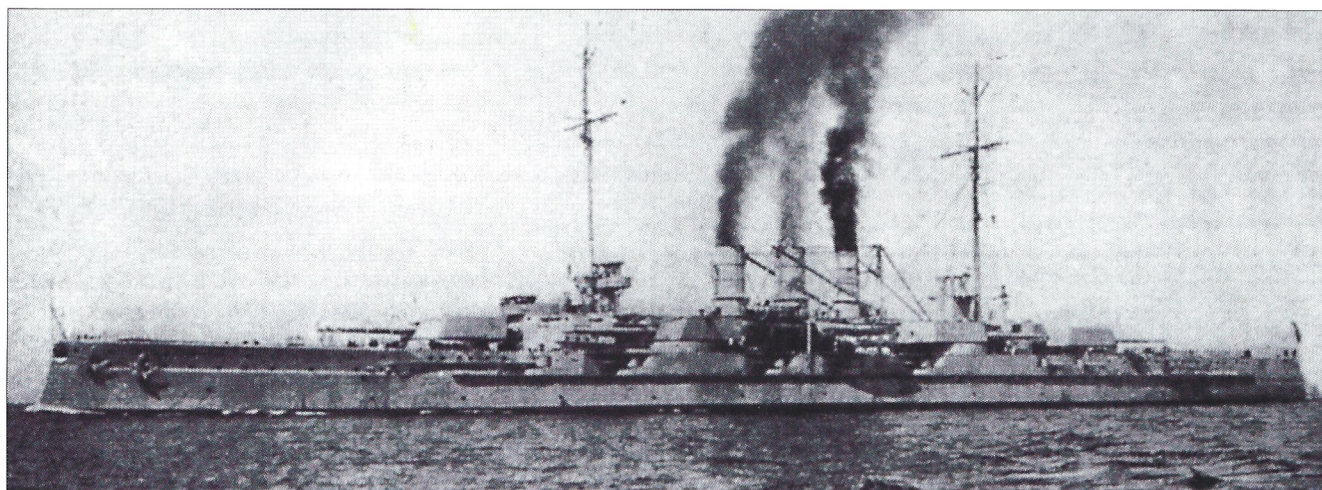
But there was no escaping the fact that the war at sea was being fought by ships. There was no racing, and cruising was impossible as pleasure boats were not allowed to venture more than a mile from their home ports. Boatyards without Admiralty work lay idle, their slipways littered with half-built, cancelled orders, their men at the front. There was nothing else for it – the magazine rapidly set itself up as an expert in naval matters. Articles suddenly appeared detailing the designs of German submarines and battleships, and early naval skirmishes received enthusiastic analysis. An extraordinary miniature naval campaign with gunboats on Lake Tanganyika, in East Africa, received pages of coverage, with photographs (see pages 26-7). In March 1915 there appeared a long and erudite treatise on British naval gunnery. The author clearly knew his subject a little too well, for

certain crucial paragraphs were replaced with the apologetic note “Deletion by Censor”.

Government influence on the printed word became all-encompassing as the war drew on. The British Admiralty kept its cards desperately close to its chest, and any information it did release was pounced on by the censor. Plans, photographs and reports of new American and German vessels were regularly featured, but there was a dearth of news from Britain. When Thornycroft’s new Coastal Motor Boat design was launched it was one of the best motor boating stories of the war, but the magazine was given barely enough facts to fill half a page. And of the giant naval engagement off Denmark that we now know as the Battle of Jutland, there was not a single mention.

Still, with the appointment of A. P. Chalkley to the editor’s chair in 1912, *The Motor Boat* had secured a noted expert on engines, who had visited most of the great German engineering

German battleship of the Helgoland class, 1911-12, which the magazine felt to be “a successful type”.





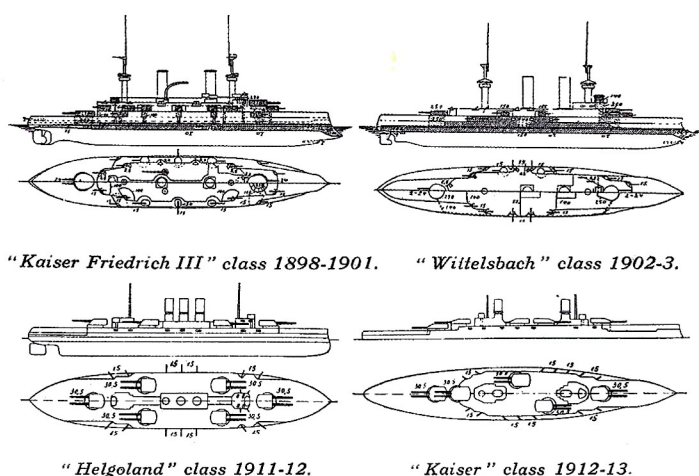
Taking the war to sea: German fast motor boats pictured engaging a Russian seaplane.



firms before the war. His inside knowledge of the enemy was put to good use. Security had been tight at Krupp's works in Kiel, he noted, but he felt under no such inhibition when he visited MAN's huge factory at Nuremberg, where submarine engines were being constructed. However, "the most astute questioner could not possibly have penetrated the sphinx-like attitude of the engineer who piloted me round, and would give the fullest information on anything under the sun except the large Diesel engine." Chalkley spent much of the war in Basra, supervising the maintenance of a fleet of Red Cross launches.

Censorship in the press was the herald to hardship in the High Street. In the month of April 1917 German U-boats sank more than half a million tons of British shipping. There was just six weeks' supply of corn in the country. Admiral Jellicoe informed his American opposite number that the war was lost if a solution could not be

*A 40ft (12.19m)
Thornycroft
Coastal Motor
Boat, from the
issue of 29
August 1918.*



"Kaiser Friedrich III" class 1898-1901.

"Wittelsbach" class 1902-3.

"Helgoland" class 1911-12.

"Kaiser" class 1912-13.

Battleship spotting in the 26 November 1914 issue.

"The prettiest little scrap"

You will not find the Battle of Lake Tanganyika given much prominence in histories of the First World War, but *The Motor Boat* knew a good story when it saw one, and gave this bizarre imperial skirmish a good deal of coverage in its issue of 1 June 1916.

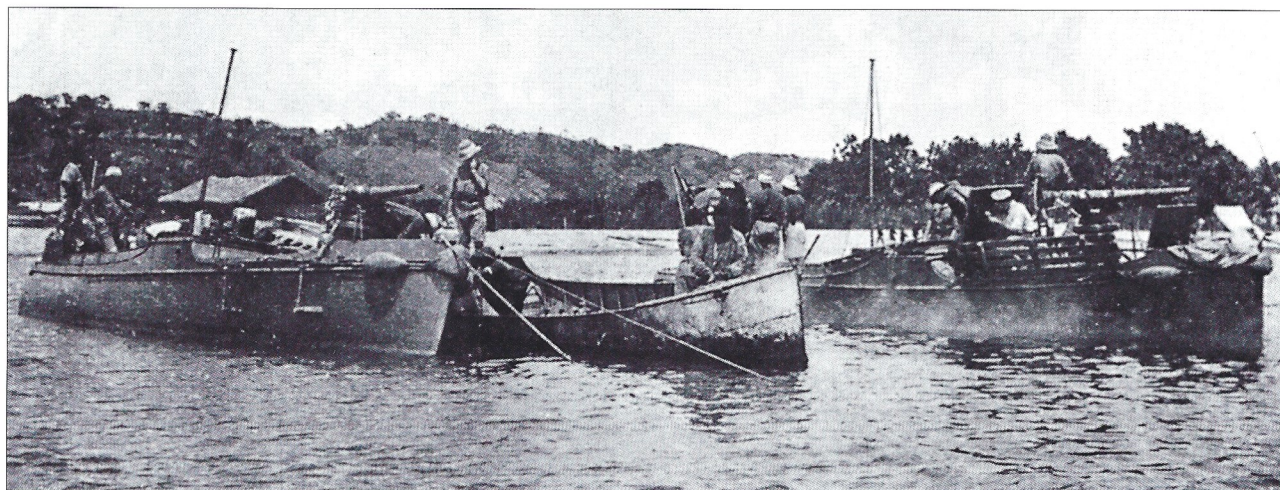
"Two of the prettiest little naval 'scrap's' which have occurred during the war were the fights upon Lake Tanganyika between German gunboats and British motor boats," the magazine enthused, with an innocent Edwardian jollity – just a month before the Somme offensive – that seems jarring to the modern ear. "Although each German vessel measured many times the tonnage of the two British boats together and carried much heavier armaments, one, the *Kungani*, surrendered 20 minutes after the action had begun, while the other, the *Von Weissmann*, was sunk at the end of a running fight extending over 30 miles."

The bald fact of a naval battle in the middle of Africa seems strange enough, but as the magazine rightly pointed out, "not the least remarkable feature" of the story was the extraordinary effort the British went to in order to bring the battle about.

The Germans started it – no, really. They fitted guns to the German lake steamer, the *Graf von Götzen*, and to a couple of smaller vessels, the *Kungani* and *Von Weissmann*, and sank the British steamer, the *Cecil Rhodes*. Then they caught and damaged the Belgian steamer, the *Delcommune*, which was holed and put out of action for months. The local Belgian commander was furious and sent demands to his government for a submarine and aircraft to enable him to wage 'total war' on the lake.

A white Rhodesian planter, meanwhile, was raising hell in Whitehall about German domination of the lake. The admirals were bemused – they thought it might be a Colonial Department matter. But when the First Sea Lord heard of it, he proclaimed, "It's both the tradition and the duty of the Service to sink enemy ships wherever there's enough water to float them." So that was that.

Two 40ft (12.19m), 18-knot Thornycroft gunboats



were fitted out and shipped to Cape Town on a Union Castle liner, sailing from Tilbury on 12 June 1915. On arrival they were put on a train for the 2,488-mile journey north to Fungurumee. Then, while ammunition and stores were sent ahead on oxcarts and on the backs of native bearers, a route was cut through the bush to allow the boats, in specially constructed cradles, to be hauled by steam traction engines the 146 miles to Sankosia. By now it was 18 August, and the rainy season was due. Blocks and tackles were rigged to the traction engines and to the teams of oxen to haul the boats up, and lower them down, the steeper inclines. On 8 September the highest point of the journey was attained – 6,400ft (1,950m) above sea level.

They were nearly there – but not quite. Arriving at Sankosia on 28 September, the boats were shipped by rail the 18 miles to the shallow and rocky River Lualaba, and then taken 350 miles upstream to Kaballo. There, another train took them to the lake. It was the end of October. The expedition leader, Cdr Spicer Simron RN – who according to *The Motor Boat* was specially chosen for this expedition “on account of his previous experience of a somewhat similar nature” – then decided that a harbour would be needed to protect his boats from the frequent storms, and set the locals to work, quarrying stone and blasting.

After all that, the actual naval ‘battle’ must have seemed something of an anticlimax. The boats, named *Mimi* and *Toutou*, were finally launched on

22 December, and after trials joined up with the remnants of Belgian fleet – an armed barge called *Mosselbak* (‘mussel bucket’), a hydroglisseur hydroplane armed with a machine gun, and some canoes. The *Kungani* was captured on Boxing Day (and re-named *Fifi*), while the *Von Weissmann* was chased and sunk on 9 February.

Incredibly, the Belgian government had meanwhile responded to the demands of their outraged local commander and sent some hydroplane speedboats and three seaplanes (presumably a submarine was felt to be impractical). As *The Motor Boat* published its account of *Mimi* and *Toutou*’s adventures, one of these aircraft took off carrying two tiny 50lb bombs and lobbed them at the one remaining German threat, the *Graf von Götzen* – so demoralising her crew that they scuttled her where she lay.

*The gunboats
Mimi and Toutou
prepare for action
on Lake
Tanganyika.*

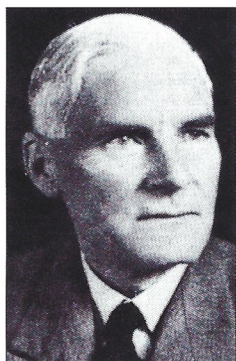


Mimi on trials on the Thames near Thornycroft’s Hampton works.

The editor and the spy

Just before he was appointed editor of *The Motor Boat* in 1912, A. P. Chalkley wrote a piece for the engineering supplement of *The Times*, entitled 'Some Large Diesel Engines'. It brought him into mysterious contact with the German secret service, and he regaled readers with the tale in the issue of July 20, 1916.

Some time after the supplement's publication, he received a letter via *The Times* from an unknown person in Maida Vale, who intimated that he had some interesting points to make. That didn't seem particularly unusual to Chalkley, who made contact and agreed in principle to meet the man, but a few days later he received a "mysterious communication on the

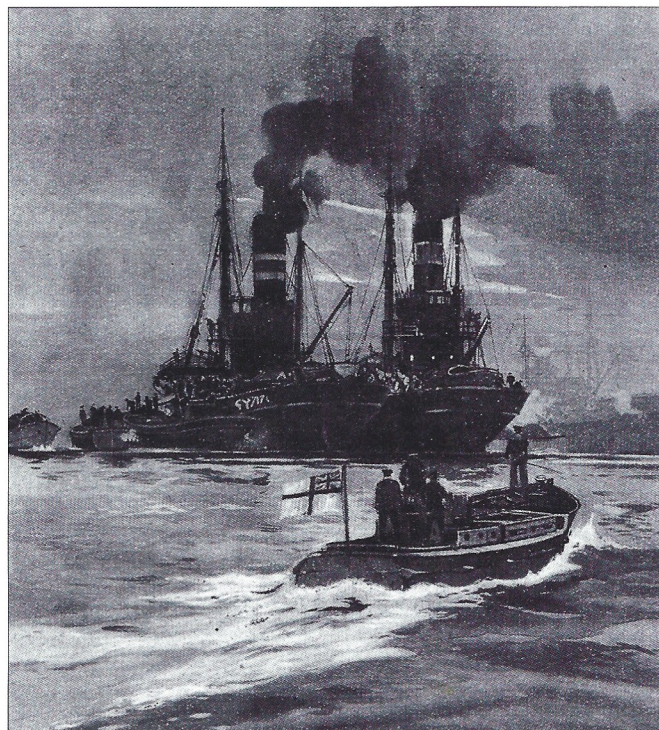


telephone" from someone purporting to be from Scotland Yard. On meeting this new contact, he was shown handwriting samples that confirmed that Scotland Yard knew who Chalkley's correspondent was: "they were practically convinced he was a member of the German secret service in

London." He was advised not to go to Germany in the near future, "as arrangements could very simply be made to prevent my coming back".

That weekend, Chalkley went on, "was enlivened by the appearance of some unknown man in the middle of the night at the window of the room where I was staying – no doubt the curious coincidence was a very apt one." The man from Maida Vale never did get back in touch – perhaps he had just wanted Chalkley's address to forward to Berlin – and Chalkley's doubts about the veracity of the Scotland Yard agent were dispelled when a friend, visiting the Admiralty on unrelated business, was asked to pass on the same warnings.

Chalkley did go to Germany a few months later, to visit the Krupp works at Kiel – at Krupp's invitation and with the express permission of the German naval authorities. "Whether there is, after all, a good deal of inefficiency in Germany," he concluded, "or whether they merely used their common sense, I do not know."



The Motor Boat Reserve helps a torpedoed ship.

found, and Churchill foresaw the collapse of the Allies in 1918 looming 'black and imminent'.

The public were of course told nothing of this, but the effects of blockade were clear enough. Virtually everything was in short supply. Paper was rationed – readers were informed that they would have to place an order for *The Motor Boat* with their newsagent, because from May 1, 1917, the newstrade's 'sale or return' system would cease. Features were published on converting engines to run on fish oil, and building ships of concrete, to save steel. "The main factor is that they meet the crying needs of the moment".

But the crisis passed, once the Admiralty remembered the convoy system of Nelson's day, and with the arrival of the Americans in France the tide began to turn. Imperceptibly at first, then with increasing confidence, *The Motor Boat* began to look ahead to peace. An army officer home on leave in early 1918 "with the mud of the Ypres Canal on my boots" decided to walk the course of the Thames & Severn Canal, and decried its dereliction when compared with its continental cousins. Even the war-ravaged canals of Belgium were in better shape. "The French inland

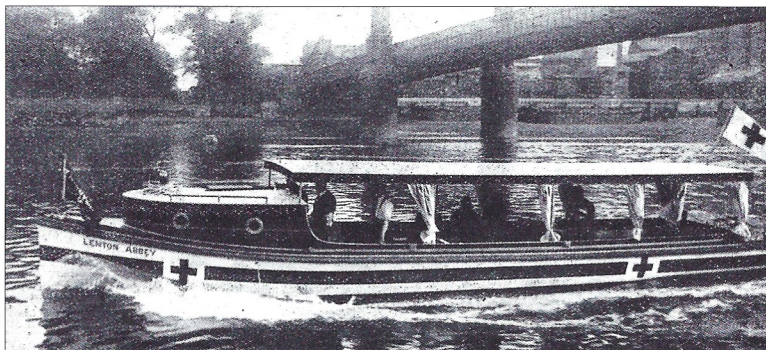
waterways,” he felt, “can be held up as a good example for our canal owners to follow.”

Readers’ boat designs were painstakingly drawn and published, though not always successfully. Writing in 1979 in the 75th anniversary edition of the magazine, Ralph Horne, an editorial staffer from First World War days, recalled how one such sketch impressed the acting editor because of the huge amount of accommodation it seemed to pack into just 35ft (10.67m) overall.

“Unfortunately he did not apply a scale and I did not see the drawing, being actively engaged on Salisbury plain at the time,” he wrote. “Some years later I turned up a delightful letter commenting on this particular design, full of witticisms, all stingingly sarcastic: ‘Any unauthorised tampering with the engine is prevented because the single entrance to the engineroom is by way of a hatch measuring 10in square. No member of the crew on watch duty need be called as he will be awake already, as his bunk measures 10in wide and 3ft 6in in length.’ Re-reading the letter lightened many a dull moment.”

Horne explained: “During the war, most letters came from patients in military hospitals, who picked up the smallest error and wrote to the editor about it.” So perhaps it was a convalescing soldier who wrote in to the issue of August 1, 1918, to tell of an interesting discovery. He had found the pre-war racing boat *Yarrow Napier* languishing in a field in Bembridge, on the Isle of Wight. The 40ft (12.19m) hull was still in good condition, he reported, and Saunders’s copper-wire stitching showed quite plainly – though not in the two photographs enclosed, which, he apologised, were rather poor.

“Anyway,” he concludes, “I thought that you, or



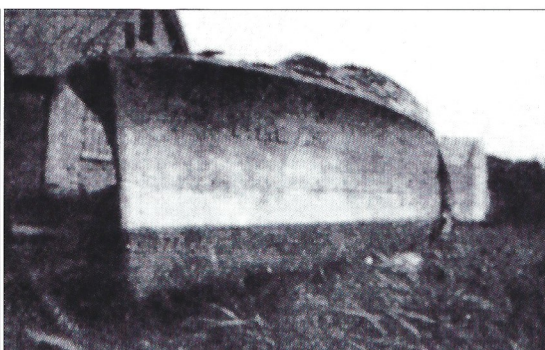
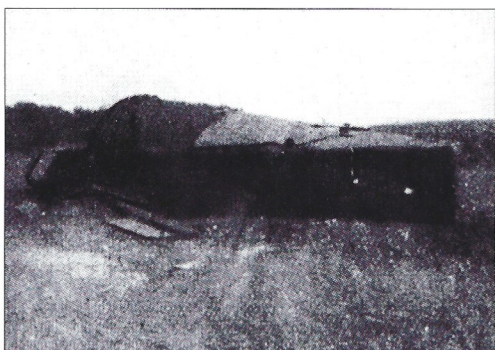
An ambulance launch built for the British Red Cross by Thornycroft in 1917.



some of the older members of your staff, might be interested to hear of her, as she certainly brings back memories of the early attempts at high-speed motor boat work and Harmsworth Trophy struggles.”

You can almost hear the catch in his voice. The boat was barely a decade old – but after four years of war he clearly felt that such memories were from another age.

Wartime traffic “on one of our canals in working order”. Many were not.



A reader writes: the pre-war racer Yarrow Napier discovered in a field near Bembridge.