

Extract from 'Of Mines and Men' by Lt Cdr G A Hodges GM RNVR

Chapter IV

Finding the Answers – Three Visits to Whitstable

The end of 1939 found the Captain of HMS Vernon extending his Mine Recovery Organisation. His very small group of RN specialist officers could not be everywhere; and one of these officers, reporting on a series of tests he had been carrying out, referred to a new monster mine that had been recovered at Sittingbourne, Kent, with the bitter statement, "This is the story of how I was done out of this huge mine".

The mine in question turned out to be a parachute mine. It was the first of a large type (1,500 lbs of explosive) which was new to us, although similar to an earlier one which had been rendered safe by Lieutenant Commander J Ouvry in November, 1939. This astonishing monster, with its vast parachute still attached to it, had been dropped inshore. It looked enormous and threatening as it lay on a trolley in the mining shed with its parachute hung spread wide above it. I was much struck by the acceptance of this notable success by the officers concerned, and indeed of the whole department, as just another job done in the routine for Service business.

I must confess that the size of it, and the fact that, unlike its two smaller predecessors (the one recovered by John Ouvry, and another by John Glenny) it was fitted with a bomb fuse, made some of us uneasy about the future. We wondered how terrible the blast effect would be when it was used operationally as a land blast bomb; fell suspended by its parachute, with no penetrating power, and then lay on the ground in a street of houses for a few seconds before detonating.

At the New Year 1940 we continued busy, and ran into a spell of very severe cold weather. It happened that all our experienced officers were out on various assignments when a signal came through from the Admiralty stating that a large parachute mine lay in Whitstable Bay, visible at low water springs, and that a party was to be despatched at once to render it safe and recover it. I was chosen to lead the party.

As I look back on some of these incidents I reflect on the formidable physical obstacles that weather and sea conditions often presented to us. Very often, before ever we got anywhere near the enemy devices we had to plan wisely and with circumspection, and then act with considerable determination, in order merely to arrive alongside the opposition, let alone succeed in our missions.

Besides this, I reflect further – and the point is very generally overlooked – on the heavy responsibility, and severe nervous strain, that was imposed throughout upon the Commander in charge of the mining department who ordered our work and proceedings. He knew us all well, and our families also, and must have been acutely conscious of the serious risks that he had repeatedly to ask us to undertake. Yet so successful was he in the execution of the Captain's orders that he was able to knit together a widely divergent group of men, RN or RNVR, of varying ages, some of whom had, I suspect, like myself, put in at an early stage for an appointment at sea!

All of us knew there was ahead of us a mathematical certainty of misfortune. Already a mine recovery vessel had been smashed to pieces with heavy loss of life. We volunteers might be lucky and be in a safe position at the inevitable detonation, or we might be less fortunate. Not an easy situation to live with, but one that had to be accepted. All this and more lay on the shoulders of Commander (M), in addition to his other duties.

To return to my story: which will illustrate the kind of situation that constantly faced all members of the team. (We were about a dozen).

It was a weekend, and I happened to be on duty. I had just over four months' active service behind me. The Vernon must indeed have been hard pushed to select me to lead the party detailed to recover the mine in Whitstable Bay. Perhaps it was the fact that I had the additional spare-time duty of keeping the mining museum in HMS Vernon, which had at least made me familiar with this kind of mine and its recovery problems. The Mining Commander gave me my orders on the last Sunday of January, 1940, and I set off in a dockyard car together with an experienced Chief Petty Officer (Ellingworth, later awarded a posthumous George Cross) and an Able Seaman.

The weather was desperately cold, and ice and snow had dislocated road and rail traffic in the south generally. Fortunately we had put a 'Handy Billy' (rope and tackle) in the boot of the car, and we had to use the tackle several times to get the car back on to the road in order to continue the journey. Eventually we got as far as Uckfield and took a late evening meal. Here the driver chucked his hand in with 'flu', so I bunged him in the back seat and we struggled on.

We made very slow progress and were unable to get any accommodation. I was well aware that the subsistence allowance would not meet the cost of any worthwhile places, so I drove the car on to Sandhurst, Kent where my elderly mother had a large house, and knocked her up. She came down and roused a servant to cook us a hot meal. My mother would not wake the other servants for it was normally midnight, and, always a disciplinarian had me help her to make the ratings' beds. Thus we got safely to bed after taking over eight hours to cover 100 miles.

Next morning, the weather outside looked even worse, and we found that another six inches of snow had fallen. The ratings got into very hot water when my mother found them in the kitchen with the servants. No guest of hers had ever helped in the kitchen, and she drove them firmly out. After breakfast we dug out the car, my mother dosed the driver with brandy and we set off, creeping eastwards.

I tried two routes I knew and both were blocked with drifts. On a third we got behind a snow-plough and so appeared safe to get across Romney Marsh, and able to reach a road that we were told was clear. But at the county border the Sussex snow-plough could be persuaded to help us no more, although another mile-and-a-half would have got us through. After appeals to the foreman I got him to introduce me on the telephone to the local office at Battle and the county office at Lewes, but neither could accept the colossal responsibility of allowing a Sussex vehicle to venture across the border into Kent. Ringing up the Home Office would no doubt have been equally futile, so we struggled back to Rye and eventually got aboard a train.

We reached the Blue Anchor Inn at Sea Salter just after dark. We had travelled less than fifty miles. We had also missed several tides, and this was seriously to hinder further operations. The Blue Anchor was run by a jovial ex-Petty Officer RN who was the exact opposite of all the official civilians who had hindered us that day. He took us in, found beds somehow for us all and would accept no payment.

Before turning in I got in touch with Sheerness, and at 0600 hours next morning we set out under the guidance of an RN Lieutenant to wade out 1½ miles to the mine lying in the oyster beds. We were supported at the beach departure point by a large party from Chatham who were very helpful, but whose bundle of iron floats (magnetic, and therefore dangerous) we viewed with misgivings.

The scene was rugged, but also memorable. It was moonlight, and the coast was deep in snow as we waded out through great drifts of frozen spindrift to reach the sea on which was a top covering of slushy ice.

We found the mine 15 degrees down by the head but with the parachute container just awash. My Chief Petty Officer and I examined it and decided to tackle the bomb fuse first as soon as it came clear of the water. We stood in the icy cold and waited on the ebb; when I could sight the fuse, its tear-off strip was missing and so I Knew it was active. The others now withdrew and soon the keep ring was off, but unhappily the bomb fuse would not come out. I was a beginner and found this upsetting, for I Knew the fuse must not be shaken, but the very idea of going back without success was even more horrible. It was said that a bomb fuse took thirty seconds to run off and detonate, and with this for comfort I put my boot on the mine and by a long hard steady pull got it out, quickly unscrewed the gaine (a small explosive primer), and called up my CPO who put the fuse in a safe stowage.

Next came the primer release which soon became accessible, but the special spanner was not tough enough to release this keep ring; even using a screwdriver and the spanner as punch and hammer I could not drive it round. My CPO and I bent ourselves to the task together, and we were defeated. By now we had lost all feeling in our hands, and the tide had turned. Our thigh-boots had begun to ship icy water, warning us of the approaching tide, and we had to retreat. The tide would not be favourable again for a couple of weeks.

A car sent for us from Chatham was twice stuck in the snow before we eventually reached the Royal Naval Barracks, where I made my report. We afterwards left for London, and had the gloomy experience of taking 6½ hours over the journey from Waterloo down to Portsmouth because the ice and snow on the line was so severe.

I took the Vernon party back again on February 10th, when the tide was once more favourable, and we were helped by the Chatham party who this time brought brass-bound casks and many fathoms of stout hemp rope. But wind and tide made it impossible to reach the mine, and all we did was to fill our thigh-boots with icy water. At a second attempt next day we managed to reach the mine, secured a line to it inside the parachute housing and then made an attempt to drag the weapon to shallower water. Although the rope was stout the launch had not the power to, and so once

again I returned defeated to HMS Vernon to wait for more favourable spring tides and better weather. This was another failure and it kept me humble.

On February 26th I returned alone to Whitstable, and took with me a special brass clamp to fit on the carrying lug of the mine. I had also a brass spindle to screw into the parachute release boss for towing, and a new strong non-magnetic four-pin spanner for the primer release keep-ring. The Chatham party met me: they were well equipped. We left Whitstable in the dark next morning and made ready on the shore at 0600 hours. The moon was still up, a glorious sunrise followed, and the wind was set offshore. I reached the mine, and without difficulty removed the primer and fitted the towing spindle and the lifting clamp. The mine was now safe from detonation, although I could not yet get at the underside to reach the detonator and take that out also. The seamen secured the flotation casks, and fixed the whole to a stout stake which was firmly driven into the oyster beds. We then retreated before the advancing tide and went to breakfast.

Afterwards we returned on a rising tide in a launch to collect our trophy, only to find that all the special casks had broken adrift. These had to be rounded up from all over the bay. Next morning we repeated the securing operation and then stood by in the launch. This time all went well, and taking the monster in tow we beached him in Whitstable harbour. There was no danger; the mine was safe, and had only the starting clock and detonator to be removed. This the Chatham party did under my instruction. They had borne the heat and burden of the day, and did not want to be left out.

Later, mounted on a lorry, the monster became of much interest to the Commander-in-Chief Nore. Unfortunately I made a bad mistake as I was having a nap to catch up on lost sleep and was not present to tell my story. Others had this privilege: and the two Chatham officers, though hardly the prime movers, were both awarded the DSC!

I then put the mine on the road for Portsmouth and got up with the driver. As we sped along I noticed that he was both swift and sure. We should beat our Estimated Time of Arrival by a wide margin, and the scientists in the non-magnetic workshop of the Vernon who were to work on the mine would not be ready for us. So I remembered my elderly mama who had been so kind to us, directed the driver to Sandhurst, Kent and proceeding up the drive to her house called her out. She was surprised: why was I in a lorry and not in a car? I was able to reassure her with a kiss; sprang up on to the truck and folded back the tarpaulin to show her German magnetic mine No. 4. She was delighted, and called the maids and the gardener. It was a proud moment for me. We then enjoyed her hospitality and went on to HMS Vernon.

The 1,500 lb bomb was opened up and examined, and next day, somewhat to my disgust, it was found that the unit had never become live as the hydrostatic clock was jammed with sand, and had never run off to put the firing system into action. Nevertheless, for me the challenge and difficulties had been very real. However, it appeared that I had failed in one more important detail: any commendation I might have earned from my colleagues was dismissed by the unanimous vote of censure passed on me by the rest of the mining department. I had returned from Whitstable oyster beds without a barrel of the natives!