In the News

Combat Action Ribbon Now Retroactive to WWII

The annual Defense Authorization Bill (Public Law 106-65) signed into law by President Clinton on 5 October 1999 authorized the Secretary of the Navy to award the Combat Action Ribbon to members of the Navy or Marine Corps who participated in combat during any period after 6 December 1941. The Combat Action Ribbon was created on 17 February 1969 and was awarded retroactively only to 1 March 1961. This cut-off date prevented a large number of WWII and Korean War combat veterans from receiving the recognition provided by the ribbon. The new law brings the Navy and Marine Corps’ Combat Action Ribbon in line with the Army’s Combat Infantryman’s Badge, which was created in 1943 and awarded retroactively to 7 December 1941.

Eligible veterans can obtain the Combat Action Ribbon by completing an SF 180, Request Pertaining to Military Records, and sending the SF 180 together with a copy of their discharge to: Bureau of Naval Personnel, Liaison Office, Room 5409, 9700 Page Avenue, St. Louis, MO 63132-5100.

Submitted by Doug Boyce, OMSA No. 908

Events

Great Western Shows to be Held in Las Vegas

The Great Western Shows, which bills itself as the “world’s largest firearm, blade, and militaria show,” has moved to the Las Vegas Convention Center, Las Vegas, Nevada. The spring show will be held from 28-30 April and the fall show from 15-17 September 2000. The shows were previously held at the Los Angeles County Fairgrounds in Pomona, California, but relocated to Las Vegas after the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors, with the urging of gun-control activists, passed an ordinance that prohibited the sale of firearms and ammunition on county property.

Tables for the spring show are available for $85.00 each, and a 10 foot by 10 foot booth can be obtained for $285.00. For further information about the show or to order a table, please contact the show office at (949) 261-5700 or on the web at www.greatwesternshow.com.
When I bought the British Distinguished Service Medal (D.S.M.) to Able Seaman George Edward Godfrey, awarded to him for services aboard His Majesty's "Skoot" *Hilda* during the evacuation at Dunkirk, I understandably became curious. Ostensibly a Dutch vessel, I wondered what is a skoot, how did one become an "HMS," and what was it doing at Dunkirk?

I telephoned the Royal Netherlands Consulate General in New York and was summarily informed that "skoot" is not a Dutch word, a response that could have spelled an abrupt end to my research. Undeterred, I then contacted the Royal Netherlands Naval Attache in Washington who referred my question to the Dutch embassy in London. From London, my question was dispatched to the Institute for Maritime History in The Hague, a very hospitable instrument of the Royal Netherlands Navy.

A prompt and complete reply from the institute revealed that a skoot is a "small coastal vessel," and that many of them fled to England when the Nazi armies invaded Holland on 10 May 1940. Some forty of these vessels were ultimately dispatched to Dunkirk on 27 May 1940 to participate in the evacuation of British and French forces from the beleaguered beaches. The skoots were hired "bare of crew" and were accordingly manned by Royal Navy Personnel. The *Hilda* was commanded by Lt. Archibald Gray, R.N., with Sea Cadet Lt. Harry Sidmouth-Willing, R.N., as second-in-command. Other ranks aboard included Acting Petty Officer Leslie Charles Curd, D.S.M., R.N., and Able Seaman George Edward Godfrey, R.N.

Two skoots, *Hilda* and *Doggersbank*, arrived at Dunkirk by noon on 28 May and were sent to the beaches, while the remainder mistakenly returned to England after reaching a few miles off shore of the Dunkirk beaches. Some twenty skoots ultimately reached Dunkirk, but their speed was generally slow. Eight skoots went into Dunkirk harbor, and four skoots including the *Hilda* headed for Bray Beach.

A continuous skoot shuttle service was established between the Dunkirk beaches and the British ports of Margate and Ramsgate. During this period, the *Hilda* took on survivors from the destroyer HMS *Keith* (sunk), the S.S. *Scotia*, and other personnel carriers. In one instance, the *Hilda* rescued a Lt. General Laidsell, two other officers, and twenty ratings. Another vessel, the minesweeper HMS *Slapjack* with 275 hands aboard, "turned turtle" as the result of enemy action, and a few of her survivors were also picked up by the *Hilda*. Indeed, the action was so heavy that Rear Admiral Wake-Walker, the Royal Navy officer in charge at Dunkirk, was forced to transfer his flag from the sinking *Keith* to Motor Torpedo Boat 102 just before the *Keith* went under. During these operations, the *Hilda* was machine-gunned by enemy aircraft in addition to receiving shell fire ricocheting off the beaches. Some 250 troops were evacuated by the *Hilda* under these perilous conditions.
The Hilda's captain, Lt. Grey, was recommended for the Distinguished Service Order as follows:

"The seamanlike efforts to embark troops off the beach at Bray Dunes was marked with conspicuous success. More than 1,000 troops were embarked, mainly transferred to other ships offshore. During this period his ship was bombed. On the second trip, acting under the orders of Captain R.P. Pim, R.N.V.R., he conveyed a flotilla of motor boats and lifeboats to Dunkirk and subsequently, working in conjunction with a flotilla of small boats at La Panne, was largely responsible for the embarkation under difficulties of 5,000 troops in some 12 hours. During heavy bomb attack [Hilda] rescued a large number of survivors from Keith, including two British and one French general officers."

The recommendation submitted for Sea Cadet Lt. Sidmouth-Willing's Distinguished Service Cross cited his "indefatigable effort" in carrying out his duties on the beach, assisting vessels aground, and personally searching for troops in the dunes. His conduct was described as "outstanding" by senior officers present.

Acting Petty Officer Curd and Able Seaman Godfrey were recommended for the D.S.M. for outstanding performance in "aiding seriously wounded men," for "exemplary conduct under fire" throughout the action at Dunkirk, and for their care of large numbers of troops.

It should be noted that Godfrey's shipmate, Acting Petty Officer Curd, was previously awarded a D.S.M. for valuable service during the Graf Spee incident off the mouth of the River Plate in December 1939, and therefore Curd received a second-award bar.

As for the skoots, a Dutch book, L.L. von Munching's De Nederlandse Koopvaardingsvloot in de Tweede Wereldoorlog says that:

"The skoots, in fact, were one of the most successful pieces of provision of the whole Dunkirk operation [Dynamo]. Small, squat-looking ships with their diesel engines astern and living quarters...next to the engine, they were built for the coast of the lowland sea."

The combination of the right vessel and the gallant crew of the Hilda made for an important contribution to the success of the Dunkirk evacuation and the saving and return to England of tens of thousands of personnel needed to pursue the next five years of world war.

Bibliography:
Bezemert, K.W., Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse Koopvaardig in de Tweede Wereldoorlog, Amsterdam, Brussels, 1986
de Booy, H.Th., Nederlandse Kustreddingsboten, Alkmaar, 1968
Divine, A.D., Dunkirk, Faber & Faber Ltd., London
"The Evacuation from Dunkirk, Operation 'Dynamo' " (26th May - 4th June 1940), Naval Staff History, Second World War Battle Summary No. 41, London, 1949