

Return to Normandy 2014.

Planning

This year is the 70th anniversary of D Day when Medusa played a pivotal role. From mid 2013 our thoughts turned to taking her back to France and taking part in the 70th anniversary commemorations. The dilemma from the beginning was should we be in France for the 6th June and miss anything happening in the UK or should we be in the UK for the 6th and potentially miss out on events in France. Added to that was having to plan in some weather contingency if we needed to be somewhere on a specific date.

The dilemma was solved to a large part by HRH Princess Royal wishing to visit Medusa on 5th June and then a request to be at Southampton on the morning of the 6th for the rededication of the D Day plaque at Ocean Village.

Initial enquiries six months before the event got the reaction from the French side that we were too late to have an involvement but, via a supporter of Medusa, contact was made with Jean Carteron who was able to make things happen. Planning proceeded in conjunction with MGB81, HSL102 and MTB102, the other boats intending to cross on 3 June to take part in events on the French side. Up to 3 June all four boats would work together, and then come together again on 7th June at Caen, finally going their separate ways on the 9th. The others planned to return to the UK on the 9th whilst Medusa planned to stay over on the French coast for a few more days.

Portsmouth

Medusa moved from her berth at Haslar to the Flagship pontoon by HMS Warrior on Saturday 31st May and was open to the public Saturday and Sunday. As usual there was great interest in her but public access was not ideal with ferry and tripping boat operations also from the pontoon.

As part of the D Day commemorations a duplicate set of bagpipes to those played by Bill Millen on Sword beach had been made and transported by sea from Scotland visiting key D day locations. The last leg to Portsmouth was on MTB102 and arrived at the pontoon in the presence of some 100 D Day veterans. As the only boat allowing visitors on board, Medusa was visited and appreciated by many of them. They were all remarkable people but two stood out. One had come from the States for the first time since WW2 and was an ex Ranger. He told us his story of scaling the cliffs at point Du Hoc, he was one of the few that made it to the top. It was the first time he had spoken of the event and it was fortunate that a British Forces Broadcasting reporter who had been working with us for 3 months captured his story on tape (BFBS put out two one hour programmes on Medusa on 6 June). The second was Keith Symons who was in a wheelchair pushed by his daughter Joanna. Keith was able to point out his ship on the Solent anchorage plan of 5th June. Much to his daughters amazement (but not ours) he sprang from his wheelchair and headed unaided for Medusa's bridge. He stood by the telegraphs for a while tall and straight, his mind taken back to 1944, and then slowly returned to his wheelchair.



Veterans on board, 2nd June

All of us were moved by the day, but this was only a taste of the experiences to follow.

At the end of the Day we returned to Haslar along with the other three boats.

At 0600 on the 3rd the peace of Haslar was shattered by all four boats starting up and departing in line astern. At the Outer Spit Buoy Medusa turned and came back in, initially to Haslar (for bacon butties) and then to the Flagship pontoon for another day open to the public.



HSL102, MGB81, MTB102 and ML1387 departing Portsmouth 3rd June.

The 4th June was spent at Haslar making Medusa presentable for a royal visitor the following day.

On the morning of the 5th, Medusa moved across to the North Camber in the RN Dockyard. This is an ideal berth for a private event but a bit of a nightmare to get into as it is a narrow entrance followed by a 90 degree turn to the right. All went well and Medusa, and crew, looked really smart.

One of the high points of the day was the arrival of Doug Withey, now the last crew member who was on Medusa at D day. He was joined by Admiral Roger Morris, Medusa's last RN captain and other guests from Raymarine and Dean & Reddyhof.



Doug Withey with daughter in law and granddaughter

Doug had a fund of stories to tell us about his time on Medusa, many were new and fleshed out the historical narrative we were aware of.

At the appointed hour HRH The princess Royal arrived and was escorted on board by Alan. From the start, the whole event was very informal with HRH telling stories of her own boat and taking a keen interest in both Medusa and crew. She and Admiral Tim Laurence had a brief tour below decks and inspected some of the original documents from D Day.



HRH the Princess Royal talking with the crew.

The time flashed by and HRH was gone to her next engagement.

The next task was tricky, extracting Medusa from the dock under the watchful eye of Roger Morris. Unhelpfully there was a boat moored in the way and a strong wind blowing in the dock entrance which made backing out fraught but it all went to plan. Once out, we had a passenger ship carrying veterans to escort out of the harbour. We had a few minutes to spare which gave Roger the chance to take the bridge and Doug the helm. The adage about never forgetting how to ride a bike is certainly true! The escort comprised two tugs with water monitors ahead of the cross channel ferry, Medusa on one quarter, Queens harbour Master on the other and a helicopter overhead. From Medusa, the ferry looked massive and close; from the ferry she looked small but impressive.



Medusa doing escort.

The morning of the 6th saw Medusa heading round to Southampton to Ocean Village and wriggling into a tight space. There has been a lot of building development at Ocean Village which involved relocating the plaque commemorating those who departed from the dock to D Day. Medusa formed the backdrop to a short ceremony followed by a reception on board for VIP guests.



The Mayor of Southampton, VIPs and veterans on board at the re-dedication in Southampton

This task completed, we had the option of an overnight passage to Ouistreham or go back to Haslar for an early night and set off at 0300. The weather was the deciding factor as strong winds were moderating and a later start would be more comfortable....relatively.

France.

At 0300 on 7th June, Medusa slipped quietly out of Haslar. It was very dark but the channel out of Portsmouth is well lit, but it was less easy to pick out the Bembridge Ledge cardinal buoy that marked the start of our channel crossing. The weather had moderated but it had left quite a big swell running that was not far off the beam which made for an uncomfortable start to the passage. Soon we passed through a series of intense thunderstorms and it was not much of a stretch of the imagination to view the lightning flashes as gunfire and think we had slipped back 70 years in time.

Eventually the sun rose and the sea calmed down and a few of the crew who had been “having a nap” appeared on deck. Lunchtime on the 7th saw Medusa arriving outside the lock at Ouistreham. There was a little confusion as the VHF radio channel for the lock had changed but the pilot book had not, plus in true French fashion, everything proceeded at a leisurely pace. Finally we were locked through and into the canal.

It was not long before we came to the famous Pegasus Bridge but were amazed at the crowd waiting for us complete with piper.



Pegasus bridge.

The third and final bridge before Caen was a tiny swing bridge with not a great deal of room on each side.



Sam wondering about swapping a rope for a fender, a tight squeeze.

Once though, we berthed astern of HMS Ranger, one of the three Royal Navy vessels present. It had been a long and tiring passage but totally successful.



Alongside the town quay, Caen

After a swift welcome drink with the C/O of Ranger it was straight off to a reception, organised by Jean, at the yacht club. The following morning there was a ceremony presided over by the Mayor of Caen at which each vessel was presented with a commemorative medal.



Commemorative medal

Medusa was a great hit with the locals and were kept very busy doing tours. Luckily we had help from our French speaking advance party of Guil and Mandy Strathalmond, Diana Watson and their local hosts both retired school teachers who rapidly learnt the Medusa story and became excellent guides.

One unexpected visitor was the lock keeper from Ouistreham who brought her family to see Medusa and presented us with two bottles of Calvados.



Huge interest from the locals.

On the 9th we departed Caen in company with MGB81, HSL102, MTB 102, HMS Ranger, HMS Express and HMS Ledbury. We approached Pegasus in line ahead and made an impressive sight.



Once through the other boats headed back for the UK while Medusa headed West to the Mulberry at Arromanche. If the weather was calm enough we planned to enter the Mulberry and fortunately it was. It's a tricky area for navigation with all sorts of obstructions. We had on board the latest charts, both electronic and paper as well as a copy of a chart surveyed by Lt Cdr C S E Lansdown on HDML1001 published 28 July 1944. The UK Hydrographic Office has also recently resurveyed using a high resolution multi beam sonar for sub surface and laser equipment to measure the above surface elements. There are still quite a number of the caisson units in place as well as sunken ones and numerous wrecks.

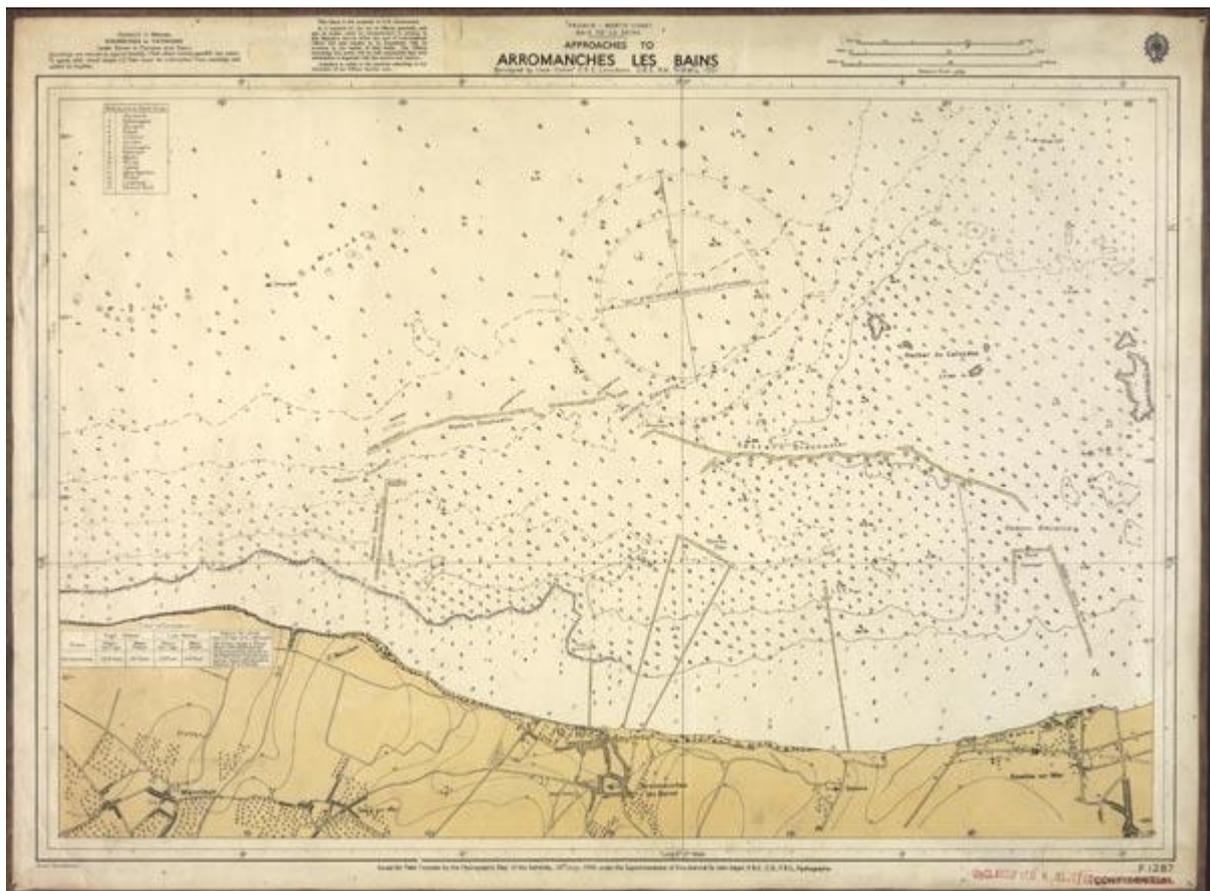
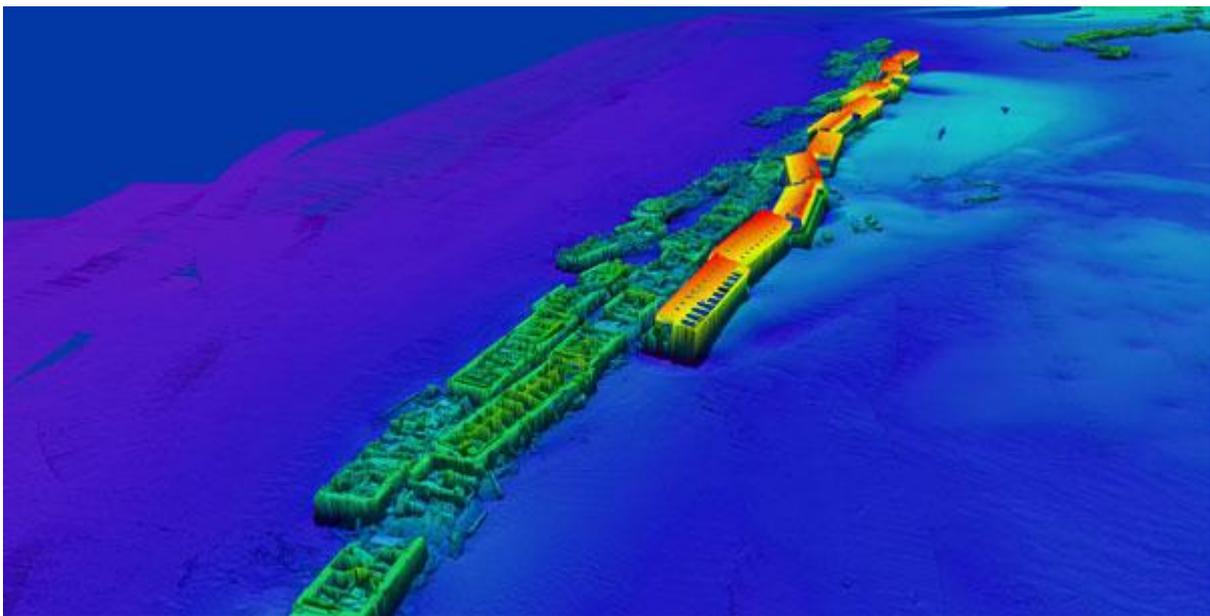


Chart of Mulberry B surveyed by HDML1001 in 1944.



Medusa inside the Mulberry, looking to the West along the Western breakwater with the harbour entrance to the right.



View from the recent survey looking East along the same breakwater. The most distant red units are those in the picture above. As units were damaged by bad weather new ones were placed inshore, hence the multiple lines.

From Arromanche we did a slow run along Omaha beach, passing above the remains of the other Mulberry harbour to Point du Hoc where the Rangers had scaled the cliffs against overwhelming opposition. The weather decided to add to the atmosphere by throwing in some very heavy showers and thunderstorms.



Point Du Hoc through the 20mm gunsight.

Once the tide was favourable we made our way into Port en Bessin, a tiny fishing village adjacent to Omaha beach. The entry was at free-flow though a lock barely wide enough for Medusa followed by wriggling into a berth only a few feet longer than Medusa. The crew were impressed by the proximity of the bar to the ship; you could almost shout your order from the bridge wing.



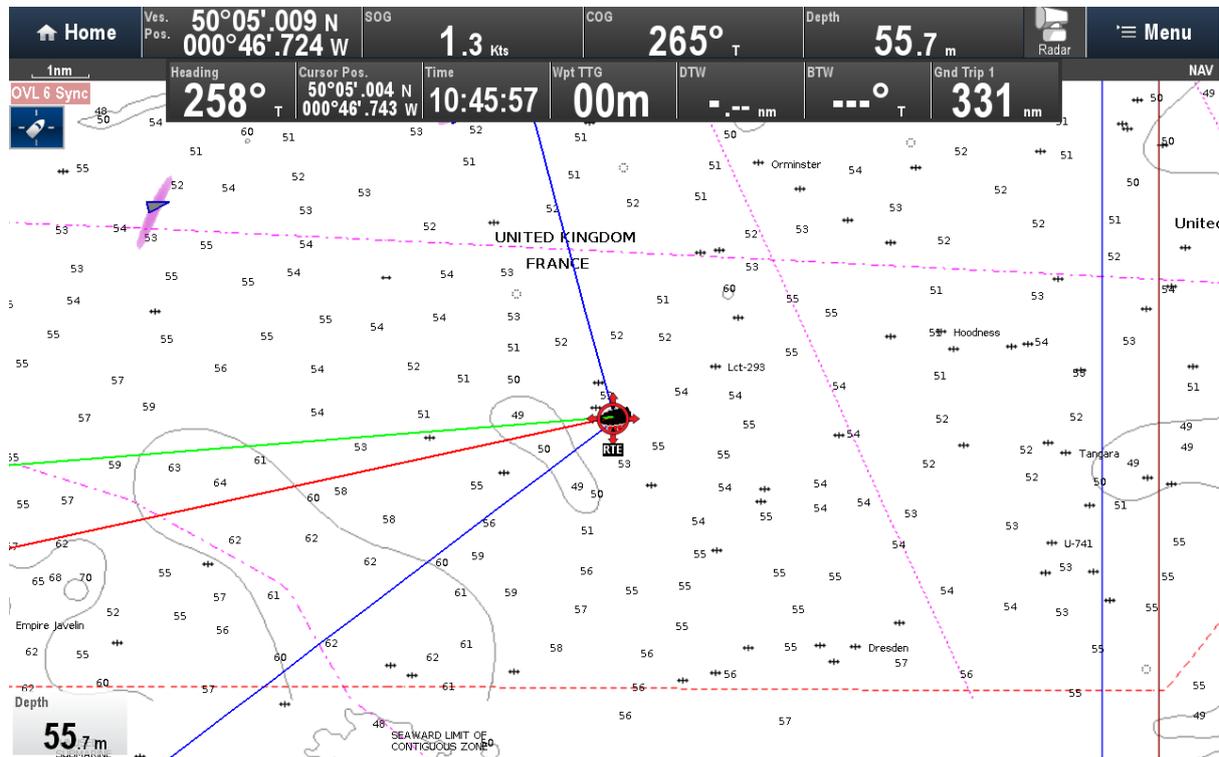
Alongside the quay in Port en Bessin

There was another memorable moment here that defined the trip. As we left the next morning there was a solitary man stood on the lockside. He was dressed in black with a Canadian veterans

patch on his sleeve. As we passed he came to attention and saluted us; he was close enough to see the tears on his cheeks. Nothing was said and we had no chance to respond but it was very moving.

From Port en Bessin we had an uneventful passage to Cherbourg and two days of well earned rest.

Leaving Cherbourg we headed for the exact spot that Medusa occupied on the night of 5/6th June 1944



From medusa's navigation system showing her on the exact spot from D Day surrounded by wrecks from that period.

Her we stopped in flat calm conditions and assembled on the foredeck to remember those who had gone before us . Some appropriate words were said followed by two verses from The Fallen by Robert Binyon after which a dozen roses were scattered on the water.

At 50 05N 000 46.7W

Medusa is now exactly where she was just over 70 years ago. This was the spot on the edge of the minefield that she marked for D Day. Think back to then – it's a beautiful day today and flat calm – then it wasn't, they arrived at night and it was rough.

Twenty young men, very apprehensive, probably seasick, probably scared half to death but they did their duty and did it well in one of the most crucial roles of D Day. That was quite something. Mercifully the entire crew came back safe but that could not have been expected when they set off.

The sight they would have seen 70 years ago would have been ships passing close by the next morning. Thousands came past and the sobering thought is that 4 hours later many of those young men would be dead. They didn't know it at the time but must have passed with enormous apprehension.

So this spot has seen some real history and we can be proud of Medusa to have been part of that and remarkable that we are able to come back all these years later.

It's important to remember those young men because they gave their tomorrow for our today.

*With proud thanksgiving, a mother for her children,
England mourns for her dead across the sea.
Flesh of her flesh they were, spirit of her spirit,
Fallen in the cause of the free.*

*They went with songs to the battle, they were young,
Straight of limb, true of eye, steady and aglow.
They were staunch to the end against odds uncounted,
They fell with their faces to the foe.*

*They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old:
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.
At the going down of the sun and in the morning
We will remember them.*





Crew with a few moments private thoughts as the roses drift away

Duty done we moved half a mile and found the wreck of LCT-293, a tank landing craft that had passed medusa on the 6th of June to go into the beaches but had subsequently foundered.

In near perfect weather we headed back to Haslar arriving at 1645. We had just had two weeks that none of us will forget; the gratitude of the veterans and the French was humbling. It is clear how much the ship means to them, how important it is to keep her going and that we are all just her ambassadors.