

George Beeching

a St John hero

This exhibition commemorates the 65th anniversary of the sinking of HMS Ibis and the death of George Beeching, who received the Albert Medal for his heroic actions on the night of 10th November, 1942.

George Beeching and HMS Ibis

George William Beeching, aged only 20, was a Sick Berth Attendant on board HMS Ibis, an anti-aircraft escort ship covering the North Africa landings in November, 1942.

At dusk on 10th November, the ships covering the landing at Algiers, Ibis among them, were attacked by torpedo-carrying aircraft.

HMS Ibis had shot down three planes, 2 Ju 88's and a Heinkel III, and was singled out by the torpedo-carrying Heinkels because her anti-aircraft fire was a "nuisance".

She dodged three torpedoes before being hit by a fourth near the engine-room; the explosion caused serious damage and Ibis very quickly turned over and sank.

There were 350 men on board when Ibis sunk. The survivors were picked up by HMS Scylla some 4 to 5 hours after the explosion. Scylla was in considerable danger herself as there were rumours of U-Boats in the area.

101 men died, including the Captain of Ibis, Commander H M Darrell-Brown, who died of his wounds on board Scylla.



Crew of HMS Ibis

In the confusion that followed the torpedo explosion, Sick Berth Attendant George William Beeching and Surgeon-Lieutenant Malcolm Joseph ("Mac") Clow, rushed to the aid of two ratings, who were trapped between decks amid scalding steam on the heeling ship. They gave them morphia to ease their pain, gave them their lifebelts and pushed them clear of the sinking ship.

Clow then managed to escape but Beeching was not seen again. Clow said: "I saw Beeching push his man clear and jump...that glimpse I had of Beeching was my

last...After getting clear I started to swim. The ship's wireless aerial caught my waist and started pulling me down. I must admit I got panicky. I don't know how far down I was dragged, but it seemed yards. Somehow I kicked clear and came up.

"No trace of Beeching was ever found. I lost a very splendid assistant. He was very keen, had been in the St John Ambulance Brigade as a boy, and volunteered for the Navy when he was 18. He was with me in another ship [HMS Pelican], and I had him go with me to Ibis."

Both Beeching and Clow received the Albert Medal in Gold, awarded for the first time in World War II, "for extreme and heroic daring". George's father and mother received the award from King George VI at Buckingham Palace. "We are all proud of him", said the King.

First-hand accounts of the sinking of Ibis

Jim Forbes

"We (the Scylla) stoged around for about an hour picking up 101 survivors of whom the Commander and a leading cook died from oil inhalation during the night."

Rikki Fulton

"I was startled to find that only two Carley floats appeared to have been released – the second being the one I had helped to release from beneath the bridge. The dearth of life-saving equipment must have caused so many deaths."



Lifeboats on HMS Ibis

Wilf Marshall

"I was 19 years old...I was on a Oerlikon gun when the torpedo struck home. When the alarm went I was in the washroom, my lifebelt hanging up, inflated, as I'd been using it as a pillow. When I reached the gun I put it under the gun well. Because my mate was already firing I grabbed a magazine. I don't know what happened to the lifebelt, because after the big bang one couldn't see for choking fumes. I didn't need anyone to tell me to "abandon ship"."

Bernard Cookson

“IBIS capsized in about 5 minutes and remained afloat, upside down for some time. My recollection of that time was of extreme cold and confusion with little knowledge of what it was all about other than hanging on to a piece of floating debris for what seemed like a very long time. It was some 4 to 5 hours before Scylla came back to pick up any survivors...I was faced with an insurmountable climb up a scrambling net but vaguely recall being helped by a crewman who came down the net and roped me aboard where I recovered consciousness, lying on a mess deck table and coughing up fuel oil.”

HMS Ibis

HMS Ibis was an anti-aircraft escort sloop of the Black Swan class. She was 1,250 tons, 283 feet long by 37.5 feet wide, had 6 four-inch and 10 other anti-aircraft guns, and had a complement of 180 crew.

Sloops of the Black Swan class were intended for the Mediterranean, which made them cold and miserable ships in the more hostile North Atlantic. They generally carried a large number of depth charges and were very well equipped with sensors, making them effective U-boat hunters as well as anti-aircraft ships.

On 1st September 1941, Ibis sailed for Scapa and then became the Senior Officer's ship of the 41st group of the Londonderry Sloop Division, operating in the Western Approaches Command. This meant she was on escort duty for trade convoys sailing to and from the UK and the west coast of Africa.

In October 1942, Ibis was refitted at Tilbury and then joined the escorts of convoy KMF1 (which consisted of 39 ships and 12 escorts), the fast assault convoy destined for the allied invasion of North Africa. The convoy sailed from Greenock on 26th October for the landing at Algiers on 8th November.

Although Ibis was an escort ship, designed to guard the troop ships from submarines, she also brought army personnel for the landings. This meant that there were more men on board than normal – about 350 in total.



HMS Ibis

What was the Albert Medal?

A Royal Warrant of 8th March, 1866, announced the institution of a decoration to award "daring and heroic actions performed by mariners and others in danger of perishing, by reason of wrecks and other perils of the sea". This decoration was to be known as the Albert medal.

After only one award had been made, a Second Class of the medal was introduced. The First Class was made of gold and bronze. The new award, of bronze only, was for "acts not of a character sufficiently daring and heroic to bring them under Our Warrant cited", but both were to be "highly prized and eagerly sought after".

A further Royal Warrant in 1877 extended awards to acts "performed on land...in preventing accidents in mines, on railways, and at fires, and from other perils on the shore". There were now four medals in all: Sea First and Second Class, and Land First and Second Class. The award was not restricted to the military.

In 1917, the terms First and Second Class were withdrawn and the titles changed to the Albert Medal in Gold and the Albert Medal. Throughout its life until eventually fully extinguished in 1971, only 45 Albert Medals of the higher class and 290 of the lower class were awarded.

Both Beeching and Clow were awarded the Albert Medal in Gold, the highest class.

Awards of the Albert Medal were announced in the London Gazette. The announcement on 16th April, 1943 reads:

"Sick Berth Attendant Beeching was between decks when HMS Ibis was hit. The explosion caused serious damage and the ship took a list to starboard of about 15°. The emergency lighting partly failed and the Mess Decks were deep in fuel oil. Sick Berth Attendant Beeching showed great courage and presence of mind. He helped those who came forward with wounds, among them one man very badly burned about the face and hands. Sick Berth Attendant Beeching took him to the Sick Bay and gave him morphia. When the ship began to heel over, and it was apparent that she would capsize, he helped the man to the deck, gave him a life belt and got him into the water before abandoning ship himself. Sick Berth Attendant Beeching was not seen again."

St John Ambulance and the Royal Navy

St John Ambulance has had a long association with the Royal Navy.

In 1900, the St John Ambulance Brigade was asked to form a reserve of naval sick berth staff in case the Fleet was mobilised in an emergency.

By 1913 there were 1015 trained reservists. During the First World War, 3024 members of the Brigade served in the RNASBR.

After the war, new regulations were developed and Reservists began to be awarded the Royal Naval Long Service Medal (for 15 years service) and Good Conduct Medals.

Partial mobilisation of the Reserve began again in 1938 as a result of the Munich crisis. 705 reservists reported for duty but were released shortly afterwards. However, the following year saw the Reserve being mobilised for war service again; by 1943 there were 3807 reservists serving in the Navy.

George Beeching had been a member of the St John Ambulance Brigade, Wallasey Division, in Cheshire, as were his parents and, later, his sisters. He was actively involved in the early days of ARP in his local area. Although he was too young to join the RNASBR before the war, George would have been well aware of the work of Brigade members as sick birth Reservists. It is highly likely that this influenced his decision to volunteer as a Sick Berth Attendant in the Navy as soon as he was 18.



George Beeching in his St John Ambulance uniform