MINE DISPOSAL – HMS VERNON

My dad was about to enter the final phase of his war. He had already endured eight months aboard a destroyer in the Mediterranean, months marked by almost continuous battle. He was sunk at Tobruk, survived six months as a prisoner of war in Italy and then spent 51 days at sea, covering 13,500 nautical miles to make it home. Yet the Royal Navy still had one more surprise in store.

When he was repatriated from Italy, he believed he had signed documents agreeing not to engage in active combat because it would contravene the Geneva Convention, a view that was widely held by other sailors and Marines. Why he should think this, and the truth of the matter, is a complicated story explained in the essay 'Repatriation to the UK'.

I remember his stories about being sent to Whale Island, the Navy's gunnery school, with the expectation he would return to sea. There he saw familiar faces, people who, unlike him, had never served in active duty. This didn't seem fair, and his sense of injustice flared. I have no idea what was said, but whether as a reprimand or a concession, his posting was changed. Instead of joining another ship, he was assigned to the Navy's establishment responsible for making sea mines safe (HMS Vernon). It was the period of his war he talked about with the fondest memories and it's the subject of this final essay.

My knowledge of what he did during these two and a quarter years is scant. I know the names of two officers whom he greatly admired; I know he spent part, maybe all, of his time at West Leigh Cottage; I know he was actively involved in mine disposal; and I know he loved working in small teams with officers.

As a child, I remember playing with the timing devices from German mines that he kept because of their elegant engineering. Today, all I have is his arm badge and the record of his annual performance evaluation grades. During his time on HMS Sikh, he was judged to be 'Satisfactory'; however, during his two years at Vernon, this changed to 'Superior'. This rating indicates that the sailor performed their duties with exceptional competence and was considered fit for promotion in due course.

Considering the dangerous nature of his job, this is some accolade. As I discovered, he

worked with an elite group of naval officers that made the award even more impressive, something his son never came close to achieving.

Before he joined Vernon, my parents were most likely still living in Sussex. There is a possibility they might have moved back to London and gyrated between the two locations, but I think that is unlikely. I know for certain my mum and sister were in the countryside during the early months of 1944, because I have my sister's report and photo from the village school.

On Friday, 20 August 1943, Dad journeyed to Vernon to start what was to become his final phase of the war.

He knew all about the destructive capacity of sea mines from his time fighting on the Sikh in the Mediterranean and having read about the damage they had caused, especially at the beginning of the war.

Perhaps he had seen the British Pathé newsreel *Danger!* (1940) showing a mine disposal team at work on a beach (see the Sources section). These short films were integrated into film programmes and were shown at all cinemas.

This image is from the newsreel, and can be viewed on YouTube and is very similar to another in the final section.

Almost certainly, he would have bought a newspaper (the *Daily Express*), which was full of news about the war. One item on the front page would have caught his eye: a map of Allied bombing activity.

How the war had changed since he was aboard the Sikh in the Mediterranean, just 11 months ago. The RAF was now flying bombing missions from Malta, targeting Axis shipping and supply convoys. American planes were flying from Sicily and the North African region, including Tunisia, Libya, Cyrenaica and Egypt, which were now controlled by the Allies.

The newspaper's headline was about the war in Russia: 'The Red Army is winning the Battle of Kharkov. Last night's news that it has driven the Germans from the right bank of the Donetz, where they had been established in great strength, is tremendous.' What nobody knew was that this battle and the subsequent capture of Kharkov marked the start of a continuous Soviet advance that would not stop until Berlin was reached in 1945.

Well rested and well fed, following his PoW ordeals, I would imagine he was in good spirits as he reported to HMS Vernon on a sunny Friday morning.

HMS VERNON

HMS Vernon was the Royal Navy's torpedo and mine school, initially based in Portsmouth. When my dad joined, the establishment had already been dispersed to multiple locations following intense German bombing raids, so it's impossible to determine exactly where he reported on his first day.

Given the wide range of ordnance and tasks that it managed, the organisation must have been extensive, with specialised departments dedicated to torpedoes, mines, depth charges, anti-submarine weapons and the techniques required to handle them. It was both a research and development station and a training school, testing new designs and investigating enemy weapons. Vernon was the hub of Britain's mine warfare effort, devising how naval bomb-disposal teams rendered mines safe.

Its reach went beyond classrooms and laboratories: Vernon also housed a printing section producing technical manuals, pamphlets and diagrams, ensuring that tested procedures were standardised across the Fleet. From solving the mysteries of enemy mines to training the men who had to defuse them, Vernon provided the expertise that underpinned the Navy's ability to keep its ships and harbours safe.

The Sources at the end of this essay include publications about Vernon's wartime story that contain some wonderful photos showing what it must have been like to be there.

I assume my dad's first assignment would have been to attend a training course about

mines. The organisation's *Centenary Booklet* states that 'Mining Instruction' moved back to Vernon (Portsmouth) in August 1943, relieving congestion at Roedean*, so it's possible his instruction could have been at either location.

I have no idea how long that training would have been – more than a few days, less than a month. There are no records showing how many officers and ratings (the most junior class of seaman) were being trained at this time.

I am pretty sure about one name he would have heard during these early days: Commander Ouvry, who had become a legend in the world of mine disposal. What he achieved was critical to the British war effort and was recognised by a visit by King George VI (9/Dec/39), who decorated him and other officers at a ceremony on HMS Vernon's parade ground.

What was not reported at the time was that by the end of 1939, the Navy had lost two destroyers and the newly commissioned cruiser Belfast was put out of action for three years. All these casualties were caused by a new type of German mine that caused mayhem with coastal shipping, especially in the Thames Estuary and the Humber.

A crew member's account of HMS Belfast conveys the sheer power of these mines:

> Suddenly there was a violent up-thrust and a deafening bang. Then everything fell deathly silent. The whole ship heaved up and down. We were told that our keel was hanging off. Now to blow this ship so high that a destroyer escort could tell us our keel was hanging off … It must have been lifted at least 20-odd feet out of the water.

Imagine the destructive force of a weapon capable of throwing a vessel weighing 11,500 tons about like that. Fortunately, the Belfast survived because its construction was welded, not riveted, but it was out of operation for three years.

The damage caused to the Royal Navy was bad but, as this extract from *Danger UXB* by Melanie Jappy explains, it was the loss of merchant shipping that was crippling the UK and enabling Germany to win this phase of the sea war:

> Between September '39 and March '40, 128 vessels were sunk on the East Coast. I remember coming down in June of '40 and seeing the masts sticking up along the Barrow Deep. If we hadn't been able to take effective steps then I think we would have gone under. It only takes a month for this country to be starved out in war.
>
> Of course, the media was telling people that it was a phoney war. But from a naval point of view, it was far from a phoney war. The Germans had twenty-two destroyers and three-quarters of those were running up and down the east coast laying ordinary moored mines. Suddenly, we found

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* The training and instructional side of the operation moved to the girls' private school (Roedean) during May 1941, with the young ladies relocating to Keswick in the Lake District, where they remained until 1945. At its peak, 1,750 Royal Navy staff were based at Roedean.

> ourselves in November ’39 facing the fact that mines up and down the east coast sank about a hundred ships, and we hadn’t the faintest idea how to deal with it.

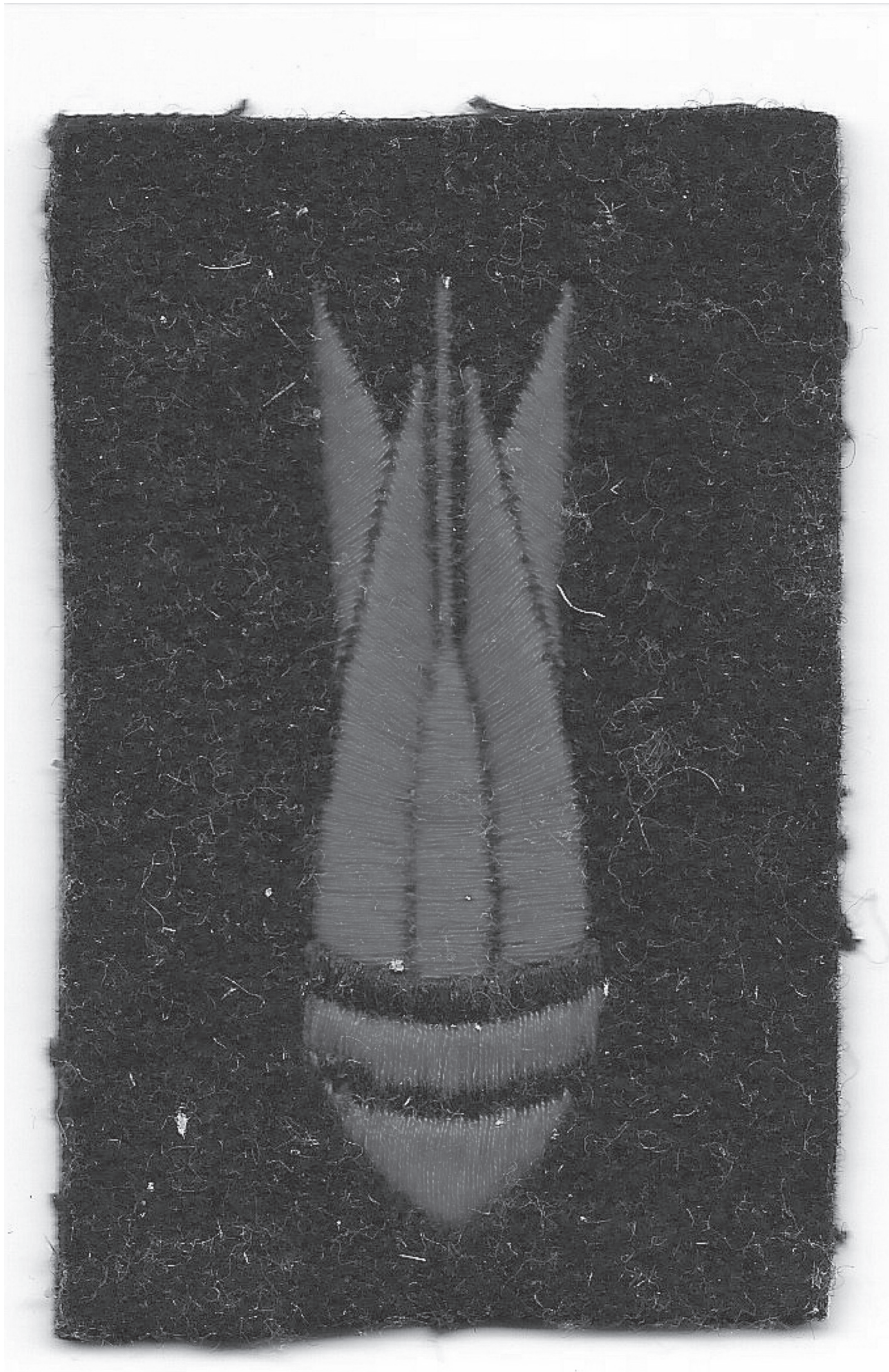
The BBC, with the Imperial War Museum, made a TV programme showing how Ouvry discovered the secrets of this mine – *The Secret War: The Deadly Waves* (see Sources). It is worth watching for the insights it gives into the man that my dad was later to meet and the bravery needed to disarm mines. His self-deprecating nature is captured in this quote from his obituary: ‘He once said that he was not pretty, intelligent or brave, but was blessed with steady nerves and strong hands.’

It’s estimated that between 1939 and 1945, the three armed services dealt with more than 45,000 unexploded bombs. In addition, there were tens of thousands of anti-personnel devices and thousands of land and naval mines. These had been laid by both Axis and Allied forces, and continued to be made safe long after the war had ended. During mid-1940 the life expectancy of a bomb-disposal officer was only ten weeks, a statistic almost impossible to fathom.

What a contrast between the battles aboard HMS Sikh and the calm of Vernon’s establishment in the Hampshire countryside – yet the dangers my dad was about to face there were no less intense.

STEADY NERVES AND STRONG HANDS

Below is an image of the only part of his wartime uniform my dad kept. I am grateful to the archivist at HMS Vernon for sharing its history with me. It is the bomb-disposal badge that sailors would have worn, point down, on the right cuff of their blue jersey or battledress. The full story of its origins can be found on the Minewarfare & Clearance Diving Officers’ Association website (see Sources).



Introduced in 1941, it shows a vertical finned bomb in red on dark blue and was given to ratings employed on bomb-disposal duties. Not everybody was happy when it was introduced, as this memo from the Director of Torpedo and Mines shows:

> “The personnel engaged in Rendering Safe Mines on land are not sufficient to justify the issue of a special badge. In addition, certain Naval Bomb Disposal Officers have been trained in the work and might be called upon to assist in an emergency.
>
> It is remarked that the actual rendering safe of mines is done by Offi-

> cers. The type of badge indicated will hardly be suitable for their uniforms and it is suggested that the ratings concerned might wear the same badge as other Naval Bomb Disposal personnel.

It seems to me the memo's author was mainly concerned about enforcing a clear distinction between officers and ratings, who were thought to be uninvolved in 'rendering safe of mines'. As we can see in the photo below, that's far from the truth. Fortunately, saner heads prevailed, and the badge was introduced; however, only one was allocated to each rating due to the expense and shortage of materials.

So, from identifying this badge I know for certain that my dad was a designated BD/RMS rating (Bomb Disposal/Rendering Mines Safe). What I don't know is the timeline of his service at Vernon, but I have uncovered some fascinating insights into what he did there.

By chance I stumbled across a website about wartime memories *(My Brighton My Hove)*, which featured a photograph of two officers and a rating making a mine safe on Brighton beach. To my astonishment, the rating – the one doing the hard work – looked remarkably like my dad. Having lived in Brighton myself, I must have walked past that very spot countless times without ever knowing its history.

Try as I may, I haven't been able to confirm the identities of those in the photo. My thanks to the archivist at *The Keep,* based at Sussex University, which retains the local imagery of the area and past copies of the Brighton newspapers for his help.

The most comprehensive reference to this incident he found was in the Saturday edition of *The Brighton & Hove Herald*, which contained an article titled *Sea Mines on the Beach* (21/July/45):

> "Excitement was caused at the weekend by the closing of a portion of the beach between two groynes to the east of the Palace Pier at Brighton and the erection of danger signs. The reason was that two sea mines had been washed up by the tide.
>
> The naval authorities promptly took charge of the situation, but they were unable to deal with the mines for some time owing to tidal action. One was recovered and taken away on Wednesday; the other cannot be reached until the tide is sufficiently low.
>
> One report contained the erroneous impression that the missiles were beach mines sown by the War Department when invasion was threatened, and this caused a good deal of unnecessary alarm.
>
> At the same time, there is always a possibility that sea mines may be washed up around our coasts, and four inspectors of the Brighton Borough Engineers department maintain a daily patrol in an effort to 'spot' them.
>
> It is the duty, also, of the public to keep a watchful eye when they are on the beach and to report to the police immediately the presence of any suspicious-looking object, no matter how harmless it may appear.

Another report was in the *Evening Argus*, Wednesday, 4 July 1945, headlined *All Brighton Beaches Open*:

> "The portion of the Brighton beaches which has remained closed owing to the danger of mines is to be opened on Saturday, Alderman Briant told the Evening Argus last night. The remainder of the Madeira Drive will also be opened.

This would seem to be a separate mine being washed ashore, or maybe it was the start of the first incident.

Perhaps it's not surprising that the wartime reporting of these mine events didn't identify the naval personnel involved. If it was my dad in that photo, it means he was still active in bomb disposal months before leaving the Navy.

To delve further, I used my trusty AI assistant to run a facial recognition match of the rating and the officer on the left of the photo, who looked very much like Lieutenant Commander Wadsley. The results showed over an 80% chance that it was indeed my dad with Wadsley. If anybody reading these words has other evidence, even if it dispels this

conclusion, please let me know. Until then, I will treat this as one of those rare finds you encounter when researching.

Having found one unknown photo of a parent, I was astonished to find a second, and this one is almost definitely my dad. To mark the 75th anniversary of the start of WW2, a volunteer living in Havant published a booklet to remember the men who lost their lives during the conflict. When searching for references to HMS Vernon, I found this photo of my dad, the rating on the back row, fifth from the left, with accompanying text about its origins.

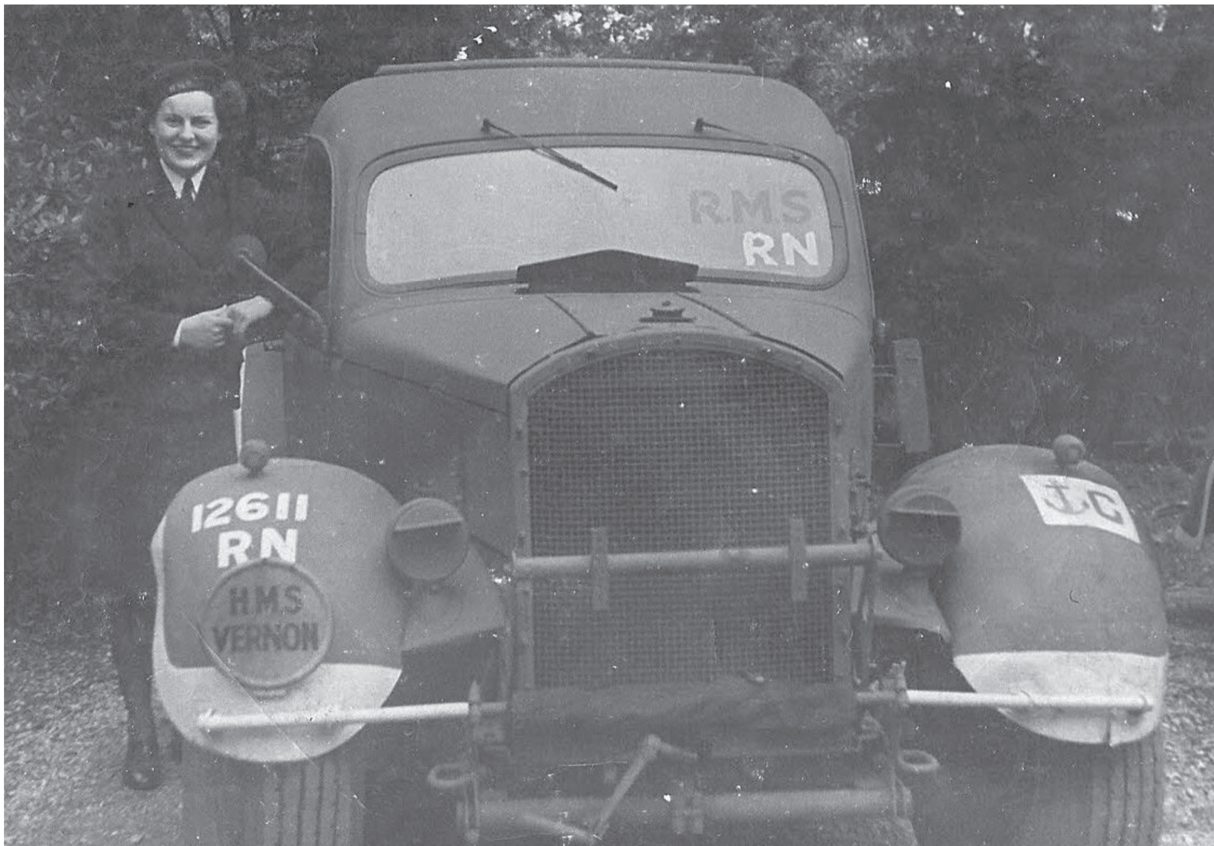
The photo was contributed by Wren Hazel Rollason, who is seated in the front row, seventh from the left. The following text accompanies it:

> Hazel, mentally alert and now in her 90th year, told me that she cycled daily from Moorlands to West Leigh Cottage, from where the RMS (Rendering Mines Safe) or 'enemy mine disposal team', operated.
>
> There were three Wren drivers on different rotas and they wore bell bottom trousers when on duty. Hazel would sometimes drive the operations car, which had RMS on the side and red wings so that it would be given priority. This was a bit of a joke, as there was very little traffic and no sign-posts. The 'Op' car had four seats and let down at the back to accommodate equipment.
>
> Hazel was required to drive to anywhere between Kent and Plymouth and sometimes to London.
>
> Hazel asked that I mention the extreme bravery of the bomb disposal experts, as she felt that they didn't get the recognition they deserved. Operating from West Leigh Cottage was Commander JGD Ouvry, whose immense courage in making the first magnetic mine safe earned him the DSO.

Enlarging the photo, I noticed that of the three ratings, my dad's naval hat was plain, and the others had lettering.

Apparently, during the war, Royal Navy regulations required that cap 'tallies' display only 'HMS' (without any ship name) as a security measure to prevent the enemy from identifying ship movements or which vessels were in port. This became standard practice in the early stages of the war and continued through 1945. Since my dad's original uniform was lost when his ship (HMS Sikh) was sunk, it is likely that on joining Vernon he was issued with a plain cap. I will take this as further evidence that the sailor on the beach, who also had a plain cap, was my dad.

The following photo is of Hazel and the car that conveyed those engaged in bomb disposal. I guess my dad must have known the Wren and travelled in the car.



This rather tumbled-down building, West Leigh Cottage, stood on the historic Leigh Park estate at Havant, Hampshire. It was originally laid out in the 19th century by Sir George Staunton, whose landscaped grounds later became Staunton Country Park. During WW2 the Admiralty requisitioned parts of the estate for HMS Vernon after leaving Portsmouth.

The grand Leigh Park House accommodated the Mine Design Department, employing large numbers of scientists and Wrens. Other estate buildings, including West Leigh House and East Leigh House, were similarly used. The site lay roughly one mile north of central Havant.

What I now needed to uncover was the role played by this group of officers, Wrens and

ratings. This extract, taken from the Royal Navy Research Archives, refers to the group photograph shown above, taken outside West Leigh Cottage:

> A third, smaller, house nearby, West Leigh Cottage, housed Vernon (M) with Commander G Thistleton-Smith. The text of the classified book on mine detonation was sent from here to the Book Production Department in 1941, and in the second row of the photo from the front, behind the WRNS, may be seen Commander Thistleton-Smith, eighth from the left, with Commander J G D Ouvrey to his left.
>
> Many of the men in this photo were decorated for their extreme bravery in the early months of the war. Their task was to investigate new German mines washed up or dropped by parachute up and down the coast in an effort to blockade English ports.
>
> Commander G Thistleton-Smith, for example, received the George Medal, and Commander J Ouvrey was awarded the Distinguished Service Order. Working mainly in pairs, they were required to investigate examples of new German mines, deduce the category of each, survey the fuse as best they could to decide what non-ferrous tools were required to deactivate them and arrange for their manufacture by the Royal Engineers or the National Physical Laboratory.
>
> Some mines also contained booby traps, requiring additional assessment and defusing. When made safe the mines were transported back to the Vernon for further research and removal of the explosives. Finally, the results of these successful pioneer operations were disseminated to RMS groups (Rendering Mines Safe) established along the coast and in cities.

At this point, I have a problem. The identification of Commander Thistleton-Smith in the photo cannot be correct if the man in the back row is my father. Navy records show that Thistleton-Smith left Vernon in July 1942, and my dad didn't join until 1943.

I have compared his image with earlier photographs, and they don't appear to match. Something else that challenges the claimed date of the photo is that Hazel didn't start working in Havant until March 1943. Unless new evidence comes to light, I will continue to believe that the man in the back row is my dad.

We know much about the group's early wartime work. In the following note, Thistleton-Smith explains why he recorded their exploits in book form (10/May/42). For security reasons it was not published until after the war because it provides a detailed record of their early achievements and disasters. Thanks to the *Minewarfare and Clearance Diving* magazine (1989), the book is now available online.

> Early in 1941, when, for the first time I began to see the mining events of the first year of war in some perspective and realise how exciting and important those events had been I asked some of you who had been most intimately concerned to write me a personal narrative; you obliged me, and a

year later I began the work of setting those narratives in order and adding a few photographs. Twenty copies of the resulting story – The Personal Side of some 'Vernon' Mine Recovery and Investigation Operations, September 1939 – December 1940 – have now been produced by 'Vernon's' Book Production Department.

This number allows one for each of you and a few over for the officers closely associated with the work. I rely on all officers receiving a copy to appreciate its private nature and on no account to allow any part of it to be used in future publications of any sort without my permission and that of the contributors concerned.

I couldn't help smiling at the clear instruction that this was an 'officers only' publication – no copies for the Able Seamen. It's packed with detail about the early days of the war; these extracts convey what it must have been like working there:

"Vernon's rendering mines safe parties were continuously engaged on this operation throughout October and November 1939, a total of approximately 200 mines being successfully dealt with.

About this time, the enemy mining situation became very critical. Casualties, which were increasing at an alarming rate, indicated that the enemy were using ground mines on a large scale. Other evidence pointed to these mines being laid from submarines and possibly aircraft.

Every effort was being made to try out various sorts of sweep, but until accurate information as to how the mines worked was received, the task of finding a satisfactory sweep was extremely difficult, particularly as the little evidence available was often conflicting. Unless a satisfactory sweep could be found quickly, we were faced with defeat.

In the early months of the war, efforts to understand the workings of German magnetic mines were fraught with deadly risk – a reality underscored when the trawler Mastiff was destroyed in the Thames Estuary in November 1939, killing six of her crew.

The book tells the story of when Commander Ouvry made safe and retrieved Germany's secret weapon, the magnetic mine, already described in this essay. What the TV programme about the event omitted was when, after defusing the mine, Ouvry's fellow officer arrived in Whitehall to brief the Admiralty, he was seated between Winston Churchill and Admiral Sir Dudley Pound* in a 'rather larger meeting than intended' with about 60 Admirals and Captains. This gives some idea of how important this success was to the war effort.

Further accounts describe the recovery and dismantling of newly developed mines, designed to detonate through a ship's magnetic field, the sound of its engines (the acoustic

* Admiral Sir Dudley Pound was the First Sea Lord and Chief of the Naval Staff in 1939 and appears again in the essay 'HMS Sikh's last battle'.

mine) or a combination of both. These so-called 'influence mines' differed from the more familiar contact mines, which exploded only upon impact with a vessel.

The book concludes on a positive note:

> "So 1940 drew to a close. Comparative calm succeeded weeks of stress and strain and enabled the organisation to be strengthened and methods of work to be reviewed and improved. We felt on top of the enemy and had every intention of staying there; and we Looked forward to the future with a confidence founded on hard won success and keen determination.

This substantial volume – over 30,000 words – was about the period most Britons called the 'Phoney War'. For Vernon's Mine Recovery and Investigation Operations, it was anything but.

Unfortunately, there is no similar document covering the period from 1944 until the end of the war – or at least I haven't been able to find one. I discovered a file in the National Archives (ADM 253/790) that I hoped would provide the answers: *History of HMS Vernon Mining Department 1939–1945*. This was a treasure trove of information about the technical details of the mines the department dealt with but, alas, it didn't provide any of the insights I had hoped for.

Piecing together extracts from the many books, referenced in the Sources, it appears their main mission was still to investigate and neutralise new types of enemy mines. Beyond the magnetic and acoustic devices already noted, the Germans also introduced pressure-activated mines, as well as designs that combined all three mechanisms.

Working in small RMS (Rendering Mines Safe) parties, they would examine and identify the mine type and devise a disarming approach. Once rendered safe the mine might be recovered for study.

The department was responsible for disseminating its research by producing documents that explained the function of new mines and outlined methods for neutralising them, ensuring the information could be used by other mine disposal teams. In short, West Leigh Cottage was the nerve centre for defeating Germany's underwater weapons by capturing their mines and figuring out how they worked.

Vernon's mine experts, including Commander Ouvry, were involved in advising about mine clearance on the European coast immediately after the cessation of hostilities. I have the faintest of memories that my dad was involved in this activity – though that may be a memory too far!

It is some measure of these men's bravery that naval personnel were awarded more honours and decorations for bomb and mine disposal during WW2 than the other two services combined.

What I would give to know my dad's exploits during his two years at Vernon. This research provides me with the broadest of outlines of what he would have done but it's very thin on detail. Of all the books about mine disposal that were written after the war, none were by those working in West Leigh Cottage – at least none that I could find.

One thing I can be certain about is that positive news about the Allied advance into Europe must have lifted the spirts of all those at HMS Vernon and throughout the country.

From the beginning of April 1945, as news poured in of Allied troops crossing the Rhine, liberating camps and surrounding Berlin, the British public's mood shifted from weary endurance to cautious optimism. The Mass Observation Study showed the public believing victory was approaching, yet many held back their joy, fearful of celebrating too soon. By the final days of April, with Hitler reported dead and German forces surrendering piecemeal, most people were convinced the war was effectively over – though they waited for the official word before allowing themselves full relief.

That day came on Tuesday, 8 May 1945, when the end of the war in Europe was declared. It's the final event for which I can write 'I don't know where my mum and dad were.' Wherever it was, they must have been ecstatic that all the worry, uncertainty and danger were ending. Dad knew that his four years in the Navy were coming to an end; however, it was not until 3 December 1945 that his naval record concluded with the words 'Released Class "A"', the official naval release date when all accounts were settled and he was legally no longer in the forces.

This indicates he had an orderly transition back to civilian status as part of the large-scale winding down of the armed forces at the war's end and that his release was not related to health or disciplinary reasons. The war in Europe had been over for 30 weeks.

Demobilisation started in June 1945, but it was a gradual process, carefully paced to avoid destabilising the military or flooding the labour market. By autumn 1945, public and political pressure was mounting to accelerate the releases, as industries at home faced labour shortages and servicemen grew anxious to return to civilian life.

I have correspondence from my dad's employer (Southern Railway) suggesting he was demobilised in early October. His naval record has an entry on 8 October stating 'Admiralty Clothing Warrant 173779 issued', implying the Admiralty authorised the issue of his demobilisation (civilian) clothing that was a standard part of the 'Class A' release procedure when a man left the Navy.

In early October, then, the Strouds' family life resumed where it had paused on 29 May 1941. Writing these essays has given me some idea about the memories my father carried from that time. How I wish his son had paid more attention when he talked about them.

SOURCES

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Videos of mine disposal

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Danger!: Disarming a WWII German Mine (1940), British Pathé
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ywxtZ-kc488

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https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XqUxIm-1ggU

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Obituary: Commander J.G.D. Ouvry
https://tinyurl.com/ypmm7xtj

The story of the Bomb Disposal badge (Minewarfare & Clearance Diving Officers' Association), published 8 January 2008
https://www.mcdoa.org.uk/News_Archive_21.htm

My Brighton My Hove website: Removing a mine on Brighton beach c1945
https://tinyurl.com/4s5fsdsm

A booklet published to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the start of WW2 on 3 September 1939 and to remember those men from Havant who lost their lives during the conflict. Regrettably, this is no longer available online

Royal Navy Research Archives giving details about the role of those working at West Leigh Cottage
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