

CAPTAIN AUGUSTUS (GUS) WILLINGTON SHELTON AGAR VC DSO RN (1902-03)

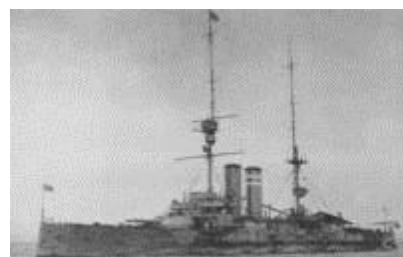
Augustus Agar was born on 4th January 1890 at Kandy, Ceylon.

He was the 13th of 13 children and always regarded 13 as his lucky number. His father was Irish and took up tea planting in what was then Ceylon. He was married to an Austrian lady. All the boys were sent to English public schools; all the girls to either Austrian or German schools. One wonders if any ended up marrying those nationals and thereby creating split family interests in the war years.



In his early naval days, Agar was seconded to the Army with 2 other young naval officers to learn to fly (basic flying training was a joint service operation, as it was in WW2). On qualifying for his pilot's certificate he was transferred to the Naval Air Station at Eastchurch in what would become the Royal Naval Air Service (later amalgamated with the Army's Royal Flying Corps to form the RAF) but they had no planes: There was as yet no aircraft industry and the Admiralty was reluctant to spend money on aircraft. (Bearing in mind the capabilities of aircraft at the time and the fact that the problems of flying from a deck had not been solved, according to Agar Their Lordships saw the future of Naval aviation as lying with airships.) So he was advised to go back to sea for a year before trying again: the fact that he had already written off three of the scarce aircraft might have had something to do with it.

He was then – 1913 – appointed to HMS HIBERNIA, one of the last pre-DREADNOUGHT battleships, known as the Wobbly Eight, where he served for three years, mainly in the Home Fleet, but with a visit to the Dardanelles at the time of the evacuation of Gallipoli: this was his first time under fire. He next went to Archangel in the depot ship for the minesweeping trawlers that were keeping that port open for the supplies we were sending to Russia. Then after a short course at the Torpedo school he joined the Coastal Motor Boat (CMB) base at Osea Island in the river Blackwater as Torpedo and Mining Officer. After some time there, he was called to the Admiralty and seconded to the Secret Service. This launched him on the events that led to his VC: there are two accounts of what happened – his autobiography 'Footprints in the Sea', published in 1959, and a tape-recording he made [Listen at <http://www.oldframlinghamian.com/images/articles/AgarVC.mp3>], presumably later, with some differences in points of detail, some significant though none affecting the general outline.



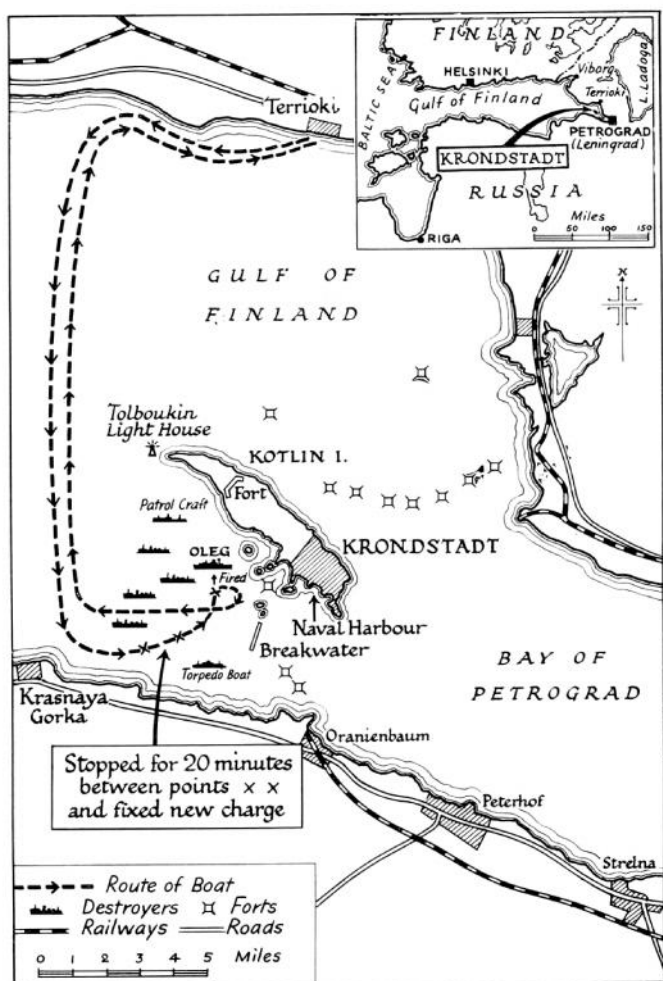
His instructions, received from the Head of MI6 – known simply as 'C' – were that together with 2 CMBs plus crews he would be transported to the Baltic (under the guise of 'civilian salesmen') where he and his crews would set up a courier service between the Finnish coast and a British agent in Petrograd (St Petersburg), 'ST25', (identified by Agar as Paul – later Sir Paul – Dukes): Agar himself was 'ST34'. His team consisted of three Sub-Lieutenants of the Royal Naval Reserve (the tape refers to them as Midshipmen but, in the photographs, they are dressed as Sub-Lieutenants) and two Chief Motor Mechanics: his own boat being crewed by Sub-Lieutenant Hampsheir (sic) and Chief MM Beeley – referred to as 'Faithful Beeley' throughout. The boats were unarmed, though each could carry one torpedo: the crews wore plain clothes but carried minimal uniform and a white ensign in case of need. He was given £1000 in cash to cover expenses.

The Royal Navy had a squadron of light cruisers and destroyers in the Baltic under the command of Admiral Sir Walter Cowan, and with its base at Bjorko in the gulf of Finland. Agar reported to Cowan on his arrival in the Baltic. The Admiral told him his squadron had three tasks – to stop the Russian Fleet from interfering with the freedom of the Baltic States, to make certain the Germans were observing the terms of the Peace Treaty, and to give British shipping free access to Finland. The Russian fleet, now controlled by the Bolsheviks and considerably more powerful than the British squadron, was based at Kronstadt, in the fortress island of Kotlin in the Bay of Petrograd, remaining a constant source of anxiety.

Cowan was his source of supply for fuel and other stores and, at Agar's request, provided a destroyer to tow the two CMBs on the long haul from Helsinki to Bjorko. According to the book, Cowan asked Agar if he had any torpedoes: according to the tape, Agar asked if he could find him some: in any event, two were found.

Two agents in Finland, ST30 and ST31, were assigned to work with him, act as interpreters and so on and he also had considerable help from the British Minister in Helsingfors, Mr H M Bell, and a well-to-do Finn, known as 'Mr L'. The principal 'courier' was an ex-officer in the Russian army, referred to as 'Peter'. The base he recommended was at Terrioki (Terijoki), about 13 miles north of Kronstadt and was ideal for the purpose. It was a yachting centre, the Cowes of Petrograd, where the pre-war aristocratic yachties kept their boats and their dachas. There was a Yacht Club where Agar could keep their stores and also a church steeple from which he could see what was going on in Kronstadt harbour. The local Finnish Army Commandant, with whom he formed a friendship, knew he was there and provided sentries. As his real task had to be kept secret, Agar originally told him that he was there to spy on the Russian fleet.

His first run was to take Peter to Petrograd, to make contact with ST25. The inner bay was protected by a chain of forts and breakwaters and his original instructions had been to take the courier to the Estonian coast whence he would make his way overland to Petrograd; but Agar, advised by Peter and with the help of a local smuggler, felt confident that he could get past the forts to the mouth of the river Neva – and, despite Cowan's misgivings, did so. He arranged to pick Peter up in 2 days time, with a second attempt 2 days later if necessary. After landing him successfully, Agar took the opportunity of reconnoitring Kronstadt on his return trip. This run was made on the 12th of June, a fortnight before the 'White Nights', a period around the end of June when it was twilight nearly all night.



The attack on the Russian cruiser *Oleg* at Kronstadt

He collected Peter successfully, receiving a message from ST25 that he was to attempt no further runs until after the White Nights – a whole month to wait.

There were two forts covering the entrance to the Bay, one in Finland, Fort Ino, and one in the South, at Krasnaya Gorka, manned mainly by Estonians



but in the hands of the Bolsheviks. The Estonians, under the mistaken impression that a White Russian Army was on its way, had mutinied and raised the white flag: the Russians had set out to subdue them. The forts had been built to defend the inlet so all their guns faced westward, which meant that the Soviet ships could attack from the east without fear of retaliation. On the morning of the day that Agar went to fetch Peter, two battleships left harbour and started a continuous bombardment from the rear.

Agar knew that both Britain and the Finns would wish Krasnaya Gorka to be relieved, that Cowan's small squadron lacked the muscle to do anything and that the only means of attack was either from the air or with his torpedoes. He therefore decided to ask permission to attack.

There is, here, a major divergence between the written and spoken accounts. In the book, he went to see the Admiral in Bjorko and told him he was prepared to attack that night but must first communicate with C: would

he send a message in Flag Officer's cypher and ask for an *immediate* reply? The reply was, as he expected: 'Boats to be used for Intelligence purposes only unless specially directed by Flag Officer'. The Admiral said he couldn't possibly *direct* him to attack, but if he did Agar could count on his support.

According to the tape, the message to C was sent via one of the MI6 agents in Finland and he had to wait some time for a reply, which was, of course, the same. However, he had no way of making contact with the Admiral, who was at sea, but felt confident that he would support him in anything he did.

Agar decided to attack that night. He assembled both his crews and told them of his decision, which was his alone. They would wear their hidden naval uniforms in case of capture and fly the white ensign. Unfortunately on the approach with no lights and at high speed, the second boat struck a floating object, breaking the propeller shaft. The mission had to be aborted as Agar towed the damaged boat back to base. (This episode is not mentioned on the tape but the book includes a photograph of the damaged boat under tow.) Not to be deterred he decided to go alone the following night. By this time, he had seen from his observation post in the steeple that the two battleships had returned to harbour for more ammunition and the armoured cruiser OLEG had taken their place.



He left, with Hampsheir and Beeley, in a short, choppy sea. As they reached the destroyer screen, they suffered a mishap that is explained more fully on the tape than in the book. To launch a torpedo a CMB ejected it from the stern – pushed out by a ram, itself impelled by a cordite cartridge: the boat just had to get out of the way before the torpedo motor fired. Until the point of ejection, it was held fast by 'stops'. While removing the safety pin from the cartridge, Hampsheir accidentally fired it: fortunately, the stops were still in place and the 'fish' did not move. Reloading with a fresh cartridge was a tricky job in the dark and in a choppy sea: Hampsheir was by now both seasick and in shock: 'Faithful Beeley' saw this and 'deliberately and carefully' reloaded by himself. Agar said 'it felt like three hours but was probably about three minutes': the book gives a delay of 20 minutes. They were still unseen by the Russians.

He then gathered speed, penetrated the destroyer screen and fired his torpedo at the OLEG 'as if it was an ordinary practice run', aiming at the centre of her three funnels. He put on full speed, and made for the Estonian coast so as not to reveal where he had come from. A thick column of black smoke rose from the OLEG. They came under heavy fire from all directions and were soaked by shell splashes but undamaged. As soon as he was clear, he turned north towards Finland at 35 knots. Hampsheir, besides being very seasick, was 'all in' from shock.



Agar received an urgent summons from the Finnish Commandant who had heard from the Commandant of Fort Ino that a Russian warship had apparently blown up, they thought sunk by her crew. Agar admitted he was a British naval officer and was responsible for the explosion, assuring him that they had been in uniform and flying the White Ensign. The Finn, initially concerned about the possibility of retaliation, finally placed his hand on his shoulder and said that he was in the presence of a very brave man. He also promised to keep the information to himself as long as the boats were at Terrioki.

Hampsheir, Agar, Beeley – the faces tell everything.

Agar needed to see the Admiral as soon as possible, but first had to make sure of the fate of the OLEG and wait to see if the battleships came out again. The Commandant made arrangements for him to be flown over the area – keeping well clear of the forts – and, once more, arranged for his transport to Bjorko. From the air, Agar saw the OLEG 'lying on her side on the bottom of the sea and looking like an enormous dead whale'. Meanwhile,

the Red Flag was again flying over Krasnaya Gorka, the breaches in the wall having made further defence impossible.

The Admiral was 'more than pleased', was sure the Russian ships would not venture out of their minefield now that one had been sunk and promised to stand by him whole-heartedly should there be 'any difficulty with the Foreign Office'.

This was by no means the end of Agar's adventures in the Gulf of Finland, indeed his most dangerous moment was still to come.

Meanwhile, as there were four weeks before he could do another courier run, he towed the damaged CMB to Bjorko, where he arranged for both boats to be repaired and refitted. To their surprise, as they entered harbour 'the forecastle and upper decks of our ships were crowded with sailors who cheered as we passed through the lines of destroyers and cruisers anchored close to the flagship'. While the presence of the boats was now well known, the secret of the Special Mission was still closely guarded. The Admiral told Agar he had recommended him for the Victoria Cross. He also told him that he was acquiring some aircraft and a flotilla of CMBs and was planning a full-scale attack on the Russian ships. He accepted Agar's offer to act as pilot and lead the boats through the line of forts by the passages he had found. About this time, Hampsheir, to his distress and Agar's regret, had to be sent home as unfit.

By the third week in July, they were back in Terrioki, making several courier runs, some by the second boat, commanded by Sub-Lieutenant Sindall, and some with a second courier, known as 'Gefter'. On one run, Sindall was seen by the forts – possibly by going too fast and making a bow wave – and fired on, returning safely but without landing his courier. Once, Peter was challenged by a patrol as he landed, so they had to select a new landing place. Once, owing to a leaking compressed-air bottle, Beeley only just managed to start the engine for the return trip.

About this time, the news was published that the King had awarded Agar the Victoria Cross: Agar writes: 'No details were given, so I became ... another "mystery VC"'. Hampsheir received the Distinguished Service Cross and Beeley the Conspicuous Gallantry Medal.

Cowan now had a flotilla of 8 large CMBs (55' against Agar's 40' and carrying 2 torpedoes each) commanded by Commander C C Dobson. A co-ordinated air and sea attack on the Russian fleet was launched on the night of 18th August: Agar led the boats through the chain of forts but did not join the attack. They sank the two Russian battleships and a submarine depot ship for the loss of three CMBs. Dobson, too, was awarded the VC. (Agar received the DSO – see citation from London Gazette later in this piece)



The Russians were now fully aware of the presence of CMBs and very much on the alert: they also dropped bombs in the woods near Agar's base. He still had to extract ST25. An attempt on 3rd August had very nearly succeeded: ST25 and Gefter were in sight of the CMB when their leaking skiff sank, nearly drowning them. (ST25 had, by this time, a considerable accumulation of documents and a larger dinghy was necessary than the 'pram' used for earlier runs.) Cowan and Dobson advised him to wait until things had quietened but he was under constant pressure from London where ST25 was urgently required as an eyewitness of events and conditions in Moscow.

So he set out on his last trip – and his 13th, his lucky number – taking Gefter, Marshall (the third Sub-Lieutenant), Beeley and a smuggler. As they crossed the line of the forts, they were picked up by a searchlight: soon others joined in, some dead ahead – blinding him, despite the smoked glass he kept handy to shade his eyes. He decided to turn back to Terrioki as they were being fired on quite heavily. He was going nearly full speed and zigzagging but still they held him. He realised that he had lost his direction and could no longer rely on the compass nor see the stars overhead. To reduce speed would make certain of getting hit by shells from one of the forts. He then suspected that one of the rudder ropes must have parted as the boat seemed to be going in circles.

Suddenly they were brought up all standing and flung down to the bottom of the boat, temporarily knocked out or stunned, as if 'a railway train had come suddenly to a full stop when travelling at sixty miles an hour'.

They had run into a rock breakwater between one of the forts and Kotlin Island. The searchlights, for some reason, were switched off, except one that was so close that the beam swept over their heads. The boat was aground very close to a fort, badly holed and leaking; they had no engine or rudder and there were three hours until first light.

They plugged the hole with leather clothing, managed to clear the boat from the sunken breakwater with boathooks, set the smuggler to bale for his life with empty petrol tins with the tops cut off, made a makeshift sail from two long boathooks lashed together and all the canvas they could cut away and, for a rudder, tied two or three empty petrol tins together which Gefter 'cleverly used as a sea anchor'. By this time, the searchlight overhead had also been switched off.

'Steadily we drifted and sailed to the north east, aided by some miracle of a current which set us towards the direction of Terrioki. Our speed must have been no more than a bare two knots or less, made up of a knot of swell, half a knot of current and half a knot from the makeshift sail, but sufficient to get us out of the danger area by dawn.' Two small fishing boats now appeared from the direction of the forts. 'Persuaded by our machine guns, they gave us their sails and a mast which we stepped in the cockpit of our boat.' They reached the Yacht Club breakwater by noon, 'having brought our 40 foot CMB, with five souls in her, sixteen miles across the Gulf of Finland with two large holes in her bottom in just under twelve hours.'

Later, it emerged that ST25, after his earlier failure to contact the CMB, had already left, with Peter, by the overland route taking his 'stuff' disguised as packets of salt – a scarce commodity that was often carried because it could be bartered for currency on a long journey. Agar's nearly fatal last trip had been unnecessary. They destroyed the boat at Terrioki by blowing it up and he then, on instructions from London, left to join up with the CMB Flotilla at Bjorko. Their activities were now well known to the Red Commissars in Petrograd and a large reward – reputed to be £5,000 – had been placed on Agar's capture, dead or alive: the Commandant earnestly begged him to leave.

Cowan had one final task for him – to go with one of the boats from the Flotilla and lay four mines outside Kronstadt harbour, enough to serve the Admiral's purpose of finally sealing in the Russian ships.

At the end of September, after five months in the Gulf of Finland, he travelled home in luxury as a King's Messenger, with despatches from the Ambassador in Helsingfors and the Admiral.

After delivering his despatches to the Foreign Office, he reported to C once more. Another man was waiting outside. 'Something in his manner caught my attention: "Are you Dukes, by any chance?" I asked. "Yes, and I suppose you must be Agar".' The First Sea Lord then wanted to see him, thence to Buckingham Palace to receive his VC from the King, who received him in his private study and talked to him for over half an hour, until an Equerry came in to say the Privy Council was ready and waiting. The King told him he must some time serve in the Royal Yacht.

His DSO citation published in the London Gazette of 11 November 1919 is as follows :-

**Lieut. Augustine Willington Shelton Agar,
V.C., R.N.**

**For distinguished services in command of
H.M. Coastal Motor Boat No. 7 in the at-
tack on Kronstadt Harbour on the 18th
August, 1919. He piloted two other boats
into the harbour through the forts under a
heavy fire and then patrolled the mouth of
the harbour to cover their withdrawal.**

In 1920 he was married – a 'Society Wedding' – but the marriage seems to have been doomed by incompatibility from the start: despite an attempt to revive it, it ended in separation and divorce in 1927.

He then spent three years in New Zealand, at the time the New Zealand Navy was being established – at first in HMS CHATHAM and then, as an Acting Commander, in command of the New Zealand Training Ship PHILOMEL. Then came his appointment to the Royal Yacht, the VICTORIA AND ALBERT, where he served for two years, being promoted Commander soon after he left.



Next, he was appointed to command HMS WITCH, divisional leader of the 4th Flotilla in the Mediterranean Fleet, with a full programme of exercises and cruises – culminating in a visit to Venice on the occasion of the Schneider Trophy races. His relief arrived while he was there and he returned to London by the Overland Express.

There followed 15 months at the Naval Staff College at Greenwich and then, in 1929, a year as one of the two Naval officers attached to the Army Staff College at Camberley.

In 1930, the Government set up an international conference – The London Naval Conference – in an attempt to agree on a limitation of naval armaments: Agar was appointed as Naval Adviser to the High Commissioner for New Zealand.

In the Autumn of that year, he joined the West Indies Squadron, based in Bermuda, in command of a newly built sloop, HMS SCARBOROUGH. Early in 1932, he remarried and, in July, was involved in a serious aircraft accident – on a visit to New Bedford, Massachusetts, he was a passenger in a light aircraft which was caught in a severe hailstorm: the pilot lost control and the plane crashed into the river. The other two occupants were killed: Agar had multiple injuries besides other complications and the doctors were doubtful if he would live. 'The best specialists were brought from Boston to wrap up what remained of my lungs.' Within a week he was off the danger list and, within two months, back in Bermuda to convalesce. He was allowed to remain on the Station, with a temporary relief appointed until he was fit again.

Then, promoted Captain, more courses – four months of the Senior Officers' War Course at Greenwich, during which he spent a day with Churchill at *Chartwell*; four months at the Tactical School at Portsmouth – 'too much Jutland, not enough about the future'; a year at the Imperial Defence College.

It was then 1936. Mussolini's attack on Abyssinia caused the Admiralty to assemble a fleet in Alexandria: Agar joined it in command of HMS CURLEW, a World War 1 cruiser recently converted as an anti-aircraft ship and one that was put back into reserve as soon as the emergency was over. He says: 'My next ship, and the one I loved best in the whole of my Service career, was HMS EMERALD, a cruiser'. The EMERALD and her sister-ship, the ENTERPRISE, served on the East Indies Station – beautiful ships, painted with white hull and upperworks and buff funnels, and, though getting on in years, still the fastest ships in the Navy. This appointment gave Agar the opportunity to revisit the scenes of his childhood and call on relatives still living in Ceylon.



The commission ended early when, in 1938, the Admiralty sent two more modern ships out to the Station and Agar brought the EMERALD back to Chatham to 'put her in moth balls' for the reserve fleet. Before the job was finished, mobilization at the time of the Munich crisis caused the process to be reversed – until set in motion once more a fortnight later. For six months, he remained nominally in command of the EMERALD, doing various jobs in the Reserve Fleet and the Admiralty and taking the ship to Weymouth for a review of the Reserve Fleet.

He had, in the meantime, been appointed as Captain of the Royal Naval College, Greenwich, but, before he had taken up the appointment, the Fleet had mobilized for war and the EMERALD was at sea once more – on blockade

duty for three months almost continually. Then came another secret mission – for both EMERALD and ENTERPRISE – carrying gold bullion from the Bank of England to Halifax, Nova Scotia: he carried 962 boxes of gold weighing over 5¾ tons. Then it was convoy duty, including escorting the first Canadian troop convoys, until June 1940.

For the next year, he held various shore jobs, including membership of an Invasion Study Group, one of the planners of an abortive scheme to set fire to the German invasion fleets in the Channel ports and Chief Staff Officer to the Rear Admiral Coastal Forces.



In October 1940 he was again charged with conducting a daring raid on an enemy harbour, called Operation Lucid. This time the plan was to strike at German invasion barges at Boulogne. The operation was dogged by constant bad weather, but they finally left on 7 October 1940. His vessel, the destroyer HMS Hambledon, was struck and crippled by a mine off South Foreland in the Channel and the project was cancelled. One rating was killed and two injured. HMS Hambledon was towed back to Chatham Dockyard by HMS Vesper.

In August 1941 at Scapa Flow, he assumed command of HMS DORSETSHIRE – a 'County' class cruiser of 10,000 tons. After a short 'work-up', he escorted a troop convoy to South Africa (all reinforcements for the Middle East had to go via the Cape) and went raider-hunting in the South Atlantic, arriving at Cape Town three days before the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbour. This led to further troop convoy work with the newly formed Eastern Fleet until, when he was in Colombo dockyard for new anti-aircraft guns to be fitted, news was received of the approach of a Japanese task force and he was ordered to rejoin the Fleet immediately.

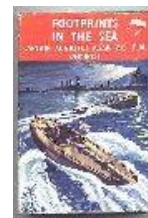
However, in setting the rendezvous position, everyone had seriously underestimated the range of the Japanese aircraft – almost double that of comparable British planes. On 5 April 1942, Japanese dive bombers caught the DORSETSHIRE and she sank within eight minutes of the first bomb hitting. Only 16 of the 500 men who went into the water died, a testament to crew discipline and the leadership of Agar and the other officers. Agar worked hard to save his crew, picking up the wounded in a whaler. He was reported by survivors as speaking calmly. During the engagement he was wounded in the leg by splinters, which later turned septic and oil fuel which had found its way into his eyes and lungs caused him much pain and trouble.



The lung trouble affected him for the rest of his life: it made him unfit for sea service and he was placed on the retired list. There was one more appointment, however – the combined office of President and Captain of the Royal Naval College, Greenwich, with the rank of Commodore. The office of President was normally held by a senior flag officer.

He wrote 3 books – 'Footprints in the Sea', 'Showing the Flag' and 'Baltic Episode'. These books are briefly as follows: -

'Footprints in the Sea', an autobiography, is the basis of this account. It is a fascinating story, told with great humility of a very brave man and an original thinker who consistently did more than he was asked

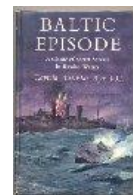


'Showing the Flag', published in 1962, contains detail of his time at sea, between the wars, that had to be omitted from his autobiography for lack of space. He states that 'the phrase always has for the Royal Navy a deep and significant meaning, largely



because it is a constant reminder of the Navy's responsibilities in safeguarding the sea links of communications which connect Great Britain with the rest of the Commonwealth'.

'Baltic Episode', is the story of the secret operations in the Gulf of Finland 1919 that also appears in 'Footprints in the Sea'. He wrote such an account in 1936 when he was on 'half pay' ('a relic of the old days when too many Captains were chasing too few sea-going commands'). At the time, the Admiralty refused him permission to publish it on the grounds that he was 'still on the active list and therefore a serving officer'.



He was President of the S.O.F in 1929/30,

In 1945 he contested for the Conservatives the seat of Greenwich in the General Election, but was unsuccessful.

He retired to run a strawberry farm at Alton, Hampshire, where he died on 30 December 1968 at the age of 78. He is buried there. His Victoria Cross is displayed at the Imperial War Museum, London, along with his telescope. The survivor of his two Coastal Motor Boats in the Baltic is on permanent display at the Imperial War Museum, Duxford, together with other material relating to his exploits there.

[Many thanks to Commander John Simpson (K32-36) for researching and writing this excellent piece on Augustus Agar VC and to Tony Martin for providing the tape recording. I have added below John's personal comments about writing this piece, which I think are worthy of inclusion :-

I am very glad that, through the chance possession of the tape, I became involved in exploring the Agar story – not only because of its inherent interest but because of several resonances for me. His pay as a pre-WW1 snotty was 4s 7d a day ('it was amazing what we were able to do with the little money we had' he said): by my time, 30 years later, as a pre-WW2 snotty, it had risen to 5s – 25p in decimal money. (That, incidentally is exactly what I get, per week, on my OAP for being over the age of 80 – just enough to buy me very nearly 2 egg-cup fulls of Adnams' Broadside.)

His book starts with a scene in the Royal Yacht: he was dining with the King (KGV) – as two of the officers did every evening at sea – and could see 'Bandmaster O'Donnell's hand' as he conducted the Viennese waltzes that Queen Mary liked so much. Bandmaster O'Donnell was a guest at my wedding. By that time, he had reached the top in the RM band service, playing regularly on Brighton pier (where my wife had got to know him); been poached by the RAF to sort out their music & was the nationally known Wing Commander R P O'Donnell, Organising Director of Music, Royal Air Force. At our reception, my newly-wedded wife flung her arms round his neck & gave him a big kiss, saying 'I've wanted to do that for years'.

Two WW1 light cruisers, the CURLEW and the COVENTRY were converted as anti-aircraft cruisers: in 1936, Agar was Captain of the CURLEW; in 1939, I was Captain's Secretary of the COVENTRY.

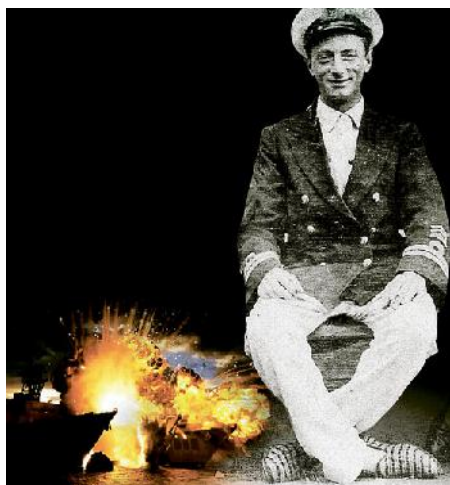
In 1937, he took command of HMS EMERALD. The Navigator was a family friend of ours & I tried to get myself appointed there on leaving the training ship – but everyone wanted either the West or East Indies and I was unlucky (I went to the SUSSEX, sister-ship of the DORSETSHIRE). In July 1938, returning to England in the EMERALD, he was diverted to Haifa to cope with a blossoming intifada: in September, the MALAYA, where I was then serving, took over the job (not directly from him) & I was bouncing about ashore in khaki shorts – a Webley .45 strapped round my middle – in charge of a party of seamen & stokers, usually on road search duty but once patrolling the town to break up any signs of intimidation on the day of a general strike. We stopped two small boys fighting but that was all.

In 1927, he spent a few days station leave in a 'charming little house ... recommended to me by Phillips Oppenheim. At Cagnes, by the 19th hole of the local golf links, he lived in a villa where he dictated his best-selling stories ...'. I have slept in that villa: in 1938, it belonged to the parents of one of my fellow

snotties & 3 or 4 of us stayed in it for our 3 days of station leave, taking our camp beds & sleeping in the very room – a separate building in the garden – in which Oppenheim wrote his romantic novels.]

The Daily Mail dated 10 May 2008 carried a full 2 page article on a new book written by Harry Ferguson and entitled "Operation Kronstadt". The picture and a large part of the article covers the heroic exploits of August Agar VC – see

http://www.dailymail.co.uk/pages/live/articles/news/news.html?in_article_id=565220&in_page_id=1770



The following is a photo of his medal display in the College Chapel



On 17-18 June 1919 Lieutenant Agar in CMB 4 sank the Soviet cruiser Oleg. For this operation Lieutenant Agar was awarded the Victoria Cross.

Just as Agar was setting up base the fortress of Krasnaya Gorka, to the South of the giant Kronstadt base, rebelled against the Bolsheviks. Ships were sent from Kronstadt to bombard the rebels. Prompt action by Agar's boats might drive away the bombarding ships and give the fortress some respite. Although Agar's orders confined him to intelligence work, he decided on his own responsibility to attempt an attack on the Bolshevik cruiser *Oleg*.

The first sortie, on the night of 16-17 June, had to be abandoned when CMB 7 broke her propeller shaft, but the next night Agar tried again using CMB 4 alone. All at first went well, but when the boat was already close to the *Oleg*, the cordite cartridge which powered the torpedo release gear was accidentally discharged. Agar had to stop for twenty minutes, close to the Russian destroyers guarding the *Oleg*, while the cartridge was reloaded. He then put on full speed, closing to within 500 yards of the *Oleg*, and releasing his torpedo just as her guns began to fire at him. The cruiser turned over and sank in the shallow water, while CMB 4 made a successful escape back to Terrioki.

In 1919 Lieutenant Agar was sent with two CMBs to the Baltic on a special Secret Service mission.

In February 1919, 29 year old Lieutenant Augustus Agar RN was asked by the Chief of the British Secret Service to undertake a very special mission.

Paul Dukes, the head of British intelligence in Russia, had been using couriers to carry reports across the border to Finland. However, Russian counter-espionage had captured many of his agents and nothing had recently been heard from him. Agar and five volunteers, with two CMBs, were to land new couriers. They would travel as civilians and if they were captured the government would do nothing to save them.

The original plan was to take agents across the Gulf of Finland to Estonia, but once on the scene, Agar decided on a much more daring course of action: to run agents directly to Petrograd, through the chain of forts that guarded the approaches. For this he needed an advanced base, and chose the small harbour of Terrioki, only three miles from the Russian border. By 10 June 1919, he had established his base there, using a deserted yacht club as his headquarters.

In August 1919 CMBs attacked the Soviet Fleet in its base at Kronstadt and sank three ships. Two further VCs were awarded and Lieutenant Agar VC won the DSO.

Encouraged by Agar's success, the Royal Navy Commander in the Baltic, Rear-Admiral Sir Walter Cowan, asked for reinforcements of aircraft and CMBs to attack the two battleships and submarine depot ship which the Russians had in Kronstadt. If this was successful Cowan's force of cruisers and destroyers could contain the remaining Bolshevik forces.

Early in August a small flotilla of 55 foot CMBs arrived in the Baltic. The crews had only a week or so to prepare. Agar's role was to lead the flotilla through the forts to the Kronstadt entrance. Six 55 foot CMBs would then make the night attack.

On the night of 17-18 August the CMBs went in, preceded by air attacks to distract the defenders. The battleships *Andrei Pervozvannii* and *Petropavlovsk* and the submarine depot ship *Pamyat Azova* were all sunk.

Three CMBs were lost — one after a collision in the narrow harbour entrance, and two sunk by gunfire — but the enemy battle fleet had been effectively eliminated. Two Victoria Crosses were won during this attack, and for his part, Agar received the Distinguished Service Order.

1 Painting by the Russian artist S. Gorshkov, depicting an incident during the attack on Kronstadt. The destroyer *Gavryll* sinks CMB 24A.

RWM Neg No Q 69742

2 A Sopwith Camel and other aircraft on a makeshift field at Koivisto. The confusion produced by the air raids on Kronstadt was an important contribution to the success of the attack.

RWM Neg No Q 11433

3 *Petropavlovsk* a 23,000 ton dreadnought mounting twelve 12 inch guns. RWM Neg No Q 69740

4 *Andrei Pervozvannii* a battleship of 17,400 tons and mounting two 12 inch and six 8 inch guns

RWM Neg No 69738





S.-1320 b. (Established—May 1900.)
(Revised September 1918.)

NAVAL SIGNAL.

P.O. OF WATCH	FROM—	TO—	REPORTED BY
READ BY	<i>Flag</i>	<i>General</i>	LOGGED BY
PASSED BY			DATE
SYSTEM			TIME <i>1000</i>

Bolshevik cruiser Oleg was sunk at her anchorage off Kronstadt on the night of 17th June by Lieut Agar in the C.M.B. his crew being Sub Lt Hampshires RNR 9 Chief Motor Mechanic Bealey. I am anxious that her method of sinking should not become known onshore in the Baltic

S.D. 1907/18. Sta. 6/14. Sta. 598/16.
Sta. 285/18.

[DETS.] Wt. 25000/D461. 250,000 Pds. 1/18. E. & Co. [1918.]

The Mystery VC.

This Coastal Motor Boat was used by Captain A W S Agar to sink a Russian cruiser in 1919. For this operation Agar was awarded the Victoria Cross. He was engaged in top secret intelligence operations, so the VC was not immediately made public and became known as the 'Mystery VC'.



Captain A W S Agar VC DSO RN 1890-1968

The most dramatic Coastal Motor Boat operations were in Russia and the Baltic in 1919. These are described in this room.

- 1 Lieutenant A W S Agar RN (ref: Hong Kong No. 114687)
- 2 Sub-Lieutenant J W Hampsher RNR, second-in-command of CMB4 (ref: Hong Kong No. 114632)
- 3 Chief Motor Mechanic M Beely RNVN (ref: Hong Kong No. 114633)
- 4 Signal announcing the sinking of the *Oleg* by Agar but requesting that the use of the CMB in the sinking be kept secret. (ref: Hong Kong No. 114635)
- 5 The General Signal announcing the awards to the crew of CMB4. Agar is awarded the Victoria Cross, while the two members of his crew, Sub-Lieutenant J W Hampsher RNR, and Chief Motor Mechanic M Beely RNVN, receive the Distinguished Service Cross and the Conspicuous Gallantry Medal respectively. (ref: Hong Kong No. 114636)



S-1820 b. <small>Standard Form 64</small>			
NAVAL SIGNAL			
FID or Message From Purpose or Source	Flag 	To 	Received by Location or Date 1/10/43
Rotterdam cruise flag was sunk at her anchorage off Kromaat on the night of 10th last by last signal on the C.M.S. as crew being sent to Hampden River & then to the Delaware Bay. I am anxious that the matter of sending aboard and being thrown ashore in the Bay			
<small>U.S. 100118 Rm 514, Bldg 304</small>			

5-1320 b.	(Established - May, 1900) (Revised - January, 1917)	U.S. of War.	
NAVAL SIGNAL		Sent by _____ Registered by _____ Forwarded by _____ Logged by _____ Received _____ Date <u>26-7-19</u> Time <u>1056</u>	
From- <i>Flag</i>	To- <i>General</i>		
<p><i>For routing the Polshorne Courier Chief A.M. the King has been pleased to make the following awards: To Lieut Agay R.N. Victoria Cross To Lieut Agay Lieut Adamson R.N. To Lieut Agay Reserve Capt. To Lieut Agay R.N.V.R. Companion Gallantry Medal</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>1058.</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>Lieut Agay</i></p>			
M. 17046 Date 26/7/19 Sig. 50478			

THE TIMES.
BRITISH ARRESTED AT PETROGRAD.
GERMAN SPY'S ACTION.

[illegible]

BRITISH NAVY
FIVE BOLSHEV
SUN

'August 20, 1919

OUR WARSHIPS SMASH THE
British Baltic Victory—T
Sunk—Cruiser Bad
SEA AND AIR ATTACK

A smashing blow has been dealt to the Baltic, where the British have sunk at least one Russian battleship. An Admiralty communiqué, issued yesterday, says:

A report has been received from the British naval command that on the night of the 1st-2nd inst. a naval engagement took place in the Gulf of Finland between the British battlecruiser HMS Devonport and two Russian battleships—the Petropavlovsk and the Sevastopol. The Petropavlovsk and one destroyer were sunk.

A cruiser was also probably seriously damaged and a motor-boat.

Our forces have made a sea and air attack on the principal fortress of Russia, guarding Petrograd, and it is in flames.



Lieutenant A. W. S. Ager, who torpedoed the Bolshevik cruiser Oleg, was yesterday decorated with V.C. and D.S.O. by the King.

HERO
DAS

It is announced to Lieutenant Agar was in cognition of coolness, and cult condition. Agar was in boat, and in cruiser Oleg. The Oleg was head of the T that had been ordered. She danger from screened by within range heavy sea that marina attack Agar, who was that area, across screen of Holoh... observed.



A group of 14 medals awarded to Captain A. W. S. Agar VC, DSO, RN

**These medals are on display in the Museum's
headquarters in Lambeth Road, London.**

VICTORIA CROSS, DISTINGUISHED SERVICE
ORDER, 1914-1915 STAR, BRITISH WAR
MEDAL 1914-1920, VICTORY MEDAL 1914-1919
(with Oak Leaves for Mention in Dispatches),
1939-1945 STAR, ATLANTIC STAR, BURMA
STAR, DEFENCE MEDAL 1939-1945, WAR
MEDAL 1939-1945 (with Oak Leaf for Mention in
Dispatches), NAVAL GENERAL SERVICE
MEDAL 1915-1964 (with clasp Palestine 1936-1939),
KING GEORGE V SILVER JUBILEE MEDAL
1935, KING GEORGE VI CORONATION MEDAL
1937, QUEEN ELIZABETH II CORONATION
MEDAL 1953.

Deposited by Mrs I. M. Agar

The following article appeared in a Sunday Times supplement dated 13 July 2008.

ESPIONAGE

Operation Kronstadt: The Greatest True Tale of Espionage to Come Out of the Early Years of MI6

BY HARRY FERGUSON

HUTCHINSON, £18.99, 368 pp
£18.99 (£1.25 p&p) 0870 428 4115

ALAN JUDD RELIVES TALES OF SPYING DERRING-DO IN REVOLUTIONARY RUSSIA

Until the October Revolution in 1917 Russia was a very important, if suffering and uncertain, partner to the Western Allies in the First World War. When the Bolsheviks seized power, aided by the Germans (who smuggled Lenin into Russia), the peace they made enabled the German Army to launch its last great attack – the Spring Offensive of 1918 – on the Western Front.

Civil war ensued in Russia as the divided Whites struggled to overthrow the better organised and more systematically brutal Reds. Allied policy was driven by a desire to get Russia back into the war on the right side, or at least to stop it aiding the Germans, and to limit the spread of the Bolshevik infection. However, cost, weariness and divisions at home meant that strategy vacillated. Britain – the major player – intervened with naval and military forces substantial enough to merit the undying enmity of what became the Soviet Union, but insufficient to do the job the Whites kept failing to do. Intelligence operations accompanied the military and naval forces, later recorded in a surprising number of published accounts (including Somerset Maugham's). Among the most vivid and exciting were those by Sir Paul Dukes, a musician, and Lieutenant Augustus Agar, V.C., D.S.O., R.N.

This book draws on the accounts and unpublished papers left by those two young men. Dukes was a precociously gifted pianist sent to pre-war Russia to further his studies, during which he learned to speak Russian as a native. By 1918, in the confusion following revolution, news of what was happening in Russia was very scarce – the British Embassy was sacked and the population cowed by Lenin's Red Terror. Mansfield Cumming, the Chief of MI6, had previously worked closely with the Russians but was now tasked to send agents into the hostile chaos in order to find out what was going on. Among these agents was the volunteer Dukes, whose mission was to establish – or re-establish – an agent network.



False red Paul Dukes (below) joined the Red Army to get information about the Bolsheviks

It was dangerous work. Not only was the formidable Cheka, forerunner of the KGB, getting into its stride, but there was hunger, hardship, violence, civil disorder, a state of war in the border areas and no knowing who could be trusted. During two missions Dukes performed his almost impossible task brilliantly, enduring hair-raising and exhausting border crossings, sleeping in graves and, under various names, joining the Red Army, the Communist Party, the Petrograd Soviet and the Cheka itself. Most of his reports have not survived but the fact of his knighthood on return – unique in the annals of MI6 – suggests their quality; for a period, the only information coming out of Russia was from Cumming's agents.

Lieutenant Agar, meanwhile, was experimenting with Coastal Motor Boats (CMBs) in Essex. These were early versions of what in the next war would be known as MTBs – Motor Torpedo Boats. They were very fast, very flimsy and very temperamental. Powered by aero-engines that were allergic to sea-water, each had to launch its torpedo from the stern and then get out of its way. Agar was ordered with two boats and their crews to the Gulf of Finland on a secret mission: they were to

Cowan – had virtually destroyed the capital ships of the Russian Baltic fleet.

Ferguson's account of both sets of operations is exciting and his enthusiasm – particularly for Agar's, of which more is known – is infectious. He rightly credits humble contributors, such as the Russians who bravely sheltered Dukes, or Agar's genius of a mechanic, Hugh Beeley, and his notes are comprehensive and interesting. But the book is warped by two needless, self-imposed disabilities. Firstly, he assumes the false omniscience of television drama documentary – 'he muttered under his breath' – almost as if he wrote with that in mind. Also, he often slips into the thriller clichés of an earlier era – 'all hell broke loose'.

Secondly, he seems to have chips on both shoulders about Cumming in person and MI6 in general. Almost every mention of either is disobliging or bitter, and sometimes plain wrong. Of course there were cock-ups and mistakes, as always in espionage and war – particularly when the two combine – but the MI6 contribution in this area and others was greater than Ferguson sees (or perhaps wants to see), as will become evident when Keith Jeffery's authorised history is published. Also, if Dukes was as badly handled by MI6 as Ferguson maintains, it is odd that he should have dedicated his account to Cumming and gone on to work for him later.

Ferguson is apparently a former MI6 officer and his book feels as if some grudge is being worked off. That's a pity, because it vitiates a good story that was due for retelling. But it doesn't altogether ruin it and there are some surprises: Dukes's other contribution was that he was largely responsible for introducing yoga to the Western world.



FOR A PERIOD, THE ONLY INFORMATION COMING OUT OF SOVIET RUSSIA WAS FROM MANSFIELD CUMMING'S MI6 AGENTS

get someone (Dukes, though they didn't know it) out of Russia. Fortunately, they were also put under the command of the senior naval officer in the Gulf – the firebrand Admiral Cowan – for any naval operations.

They never did meet Dukes; the rendezvous failed and he was eventually exfiltrated by a courageous courier. By the time the two men met afterwards in Cumming's Whitehall office, however, Agar and his crews – courtesy of Admiral

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The following photo is from the Spring 1993 OF Magazine



This photo is in the SOF archives at the College.

