The Spitfire of the seas rides again: on board a remarkable WWII rescue boat

This peerless naval rescue boat saved countless lives during Britain's darkest hour. Her reward? To be left to rot at a Dartmouth quayside. Until, that is, one man (and £500,000) came to her rescue...

The restored HSL 102 takes to the seas

In 1941, were you to be shot down over the North Sea or sunk by torpedo in the freezing Channel waters, your only hope would be for someone to find you before hypothermia set in. Luckily, there were British servicemen sworn to do just that - and the RAF Air Sea Rescue Service (motto: 'The sea shall not have them') was equipped with some of the fastest craft in the world.

In fact, when it left the British Power Boat Company's yard at Hythe in 1936, there was nothing on water faster than *HSL 102*.

The enthusiast who discovered her mouldering on a Dartmouth quayside in 1992 has spent nearly £500,000 restoring her, knowing

that she was one of an impossibly rare breed. Hardly any World War II rescue launches survive in any case, but *HSL 102* is one of only 22 '100-class' High Speed Launches designed at the height of re-armament by Fred Cooper, the man behind Donald Campbell's record-breaking speedboats.

Remarkably, TE Lawrence - Lawrence of Arabia - was involved in her speed trials at RAF Mount Batten in Devon while serving under the name 'Aircraftman Shaw'. Capable of 39 knots - much faster than a modern lifeboat - she well deserves her epithet 'the Spitfire of the seas'.

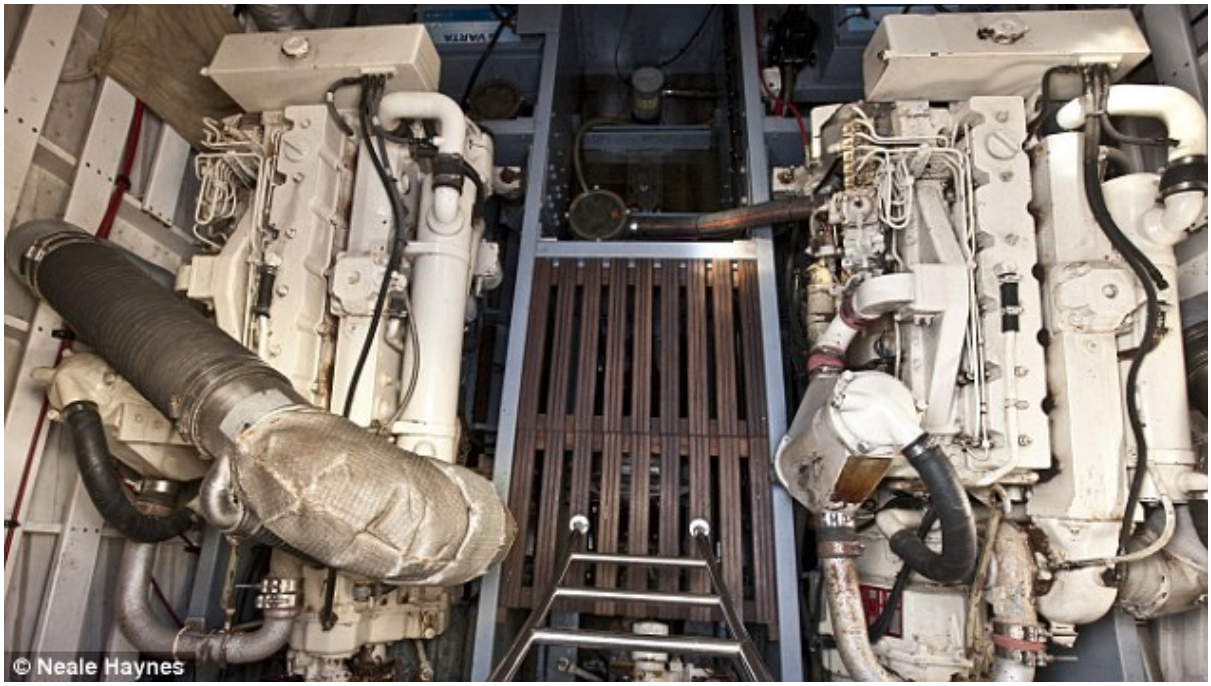
The officer's ward room. There is a small galley and space for four people. This is where survivors would be put, to keep them warm. Elsewhere, the forecastle housed bunks for eight crew and the head (toilet)

It's impossible to say who she rescued (exact records were not kept) but craft of her kind were involved in the ill-fated Dieppe Raid of 1942 and the Siege Of Malta, as well as operating from 60 bases around the coast of Britain, in total saving over 13,000 lives over the course of the war.

HSL 102 is known to have operated from Blyth in the Northeast and Newhaven on the south coast, but her range of 500 miles meant that the 'front line' could be anywhere in the heart of the sea. John Parsons, 82, served as coxswain with the Air Sea Rescue Service, and remembers how harsh conditions were.

'The deck was too high out of the water, making it very difficult to haul someone aboard,' he says.

'The 100-class were very good at speed, none better, but when you were actually involved in a rescue they'd roll and pitch. A medical orderly on board simply had a medic's kit, which was used to administer first aid before a survivor was wrapped up warm and put below decks. Sounds primitive, but remember it would only be a matter of hours before they were back at a base.'



There are three engines (one is out of sight beneath the ladder). The originals were 500hp Napier Sea Lion 12-cylinder petrol engines, the most powerful in the world at the time. They were used in several of Sir Malcolm Campbell's record-breakers and the Supermarine S.5 racing seaplane, a forerunner of the Spitfire

All the while, she was vulnerable to attack by torpedo-armed German E-boats and fighter planes. It's thought *HSL 102* was attacked by a Messerschmitt 109, killing the radio operator. Considering the design of this class of boat, it's all the more remarkable that she survived the assault.

'Underneath the rear deck was the engine room,' says Parsons, 'but everything forward of that was pretty much all fuel tanks. In order to give them such huge range, they held 4,000-5,000 gallons of high-octane aircraft fuel, so it was like sitting on a bomb. The only armour was anti-flak padding. It didn't stop bullets, it would just slow shrapnel down a bit. We lost three HSLs and their crews at Dieppe.

'For the amount of craft that went in, they had the highest attrition rate in that action. So armament was put on board: generally Browning .303s in twin turrets, like on bombers, although on *HSL 102* open guns

were placed on the deck on either side of the wheelhouse. They couldn't be any further forward than that - a boat with a gun forward of the bridge could not be classed as a rescue boat under the Geneva Convention.'

If little is known of the men she rescued - although one two-month period saw her pick up 38 survivors, German as well as Allied - there is at least good evidence for two people in particular going on board: King George VI and his wife Queen Elizabeth inspected *HSL 102* at Blyth in 1941.

By then, she was already nearing the end of her six-year life expectancy. By the middle of the war she had been superseded by the Type Two 'Whaleback' HSL, which sat lower in the water and had better armament. She ended the war as a Navy tug and by the Eighties was being used as a houseboat.

It took enthusiast Phil Clabburn to realise what a miracle of survival was hidden under the layers of peeling paint. After spending nearly £500,000 restoring her (and nearly going bankrupt until a Lottery heritage grant was found), he invited the Queen Mother back to see a restored *HSL 102* in 1996, 55 years after she first stepped on board. She attended the relaunch along with the three surviving members of

the crew. Three weeks ago, the ashes of the last of them, Cli Woolard, were scattered at sea. *HSL 102* remains as a floating memorial to the bravery of men like him.

She can now be seen at the Portsmouth Historic Dockyard (bmpt.org.uk) - where she will still give any modern speedboat a run for its money.

1. Almost the only electrical devices on board are the clear-view screens: fast-rotating circular windows that water can't cling to. Visibility was minimal, and a lookout would stand on the bulkhead (as in the main picture on the previous page) and shout down to the skipper and coxswain at the wheel.

2. The three dials at the top show the revs for the three engines. Beneath each are two smaller dials showing oil pressure and battery charge, and at the bottom are the three start buttons. The basic interior reflects the boat's dedication to speed and power.

3. Switches to control the lights and pumps. The three keys at the bottom of the box are for the engines' starter solenoids.

4. What look like throttles are in fact three engine 'telegraphs' that tell the engine room which drive to engage (ahead, astern, neutral) for each engine.

5. Three throttles, one for each engine.

6. The boat's course was originally plotted at the chart table. It is now fitted with a Garmin sat-nav.

7. A locker housing the flags used for signalling.