The First Ones In – the Story of *YMS-378*

The story of US Navy Yard Minesweeper *YMS-378*,
the D-Day heroine that lies on Stonehouse Beach in Plymouth, UK.

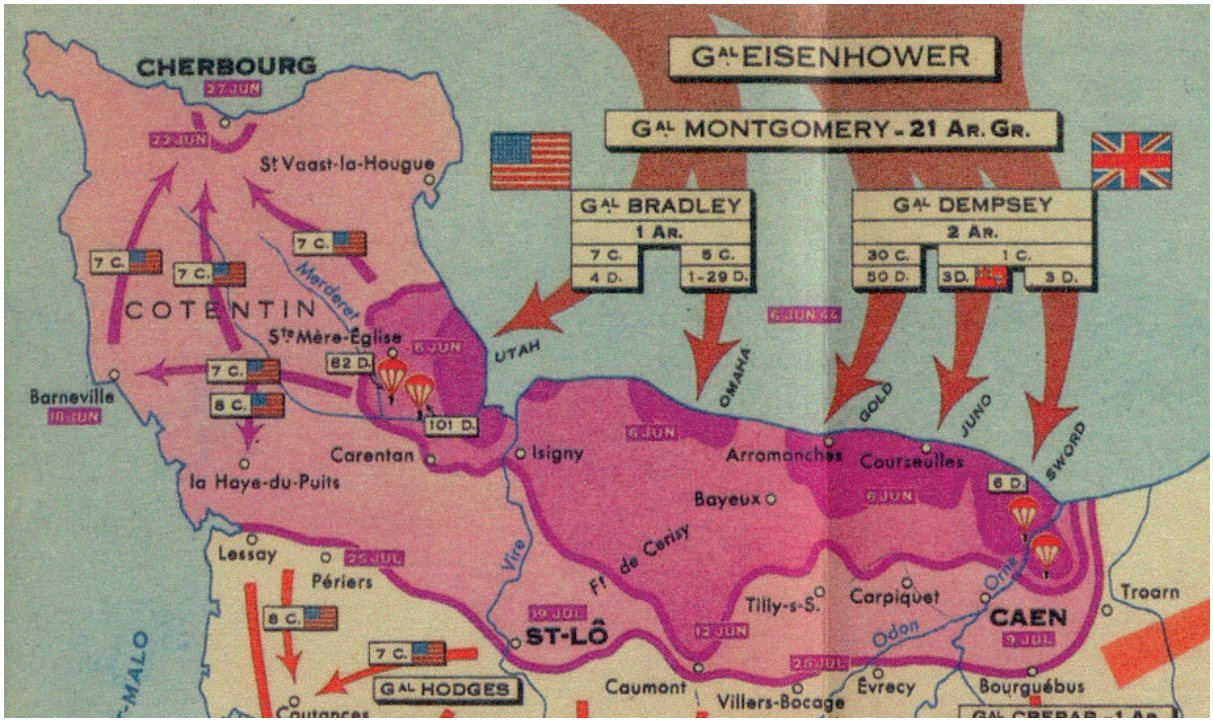
YMS-324, sister ship to YMS-378

At 3:30 am on the morning of 6th June 1944, Lieutenant Joseph J. Guidrey and his Yard Minesweeper *YMS-378* were in the shallow waters off the coast of occupied France, close to the beaches of Normandy, working in the most difficult conditions. It was dark, the sun had not yet risen and the moon was hidden behind a thick layer of cloud, and a gusty wind blowing from the west whipped up a choppy sea. The crew on board the little minesweeper were on tenterhooks, expecting at any minute that the Germans would notice their arrival and open fire with their big gun batteries. Guidrey was an American Navy Lieutenant and had been in Plymouth since May 1944, he had left Plymouth a few days earlier and sailed his ship east to Southampton before joining the huge flotilla of ships that were involved in the largest seaborne invasion in history, known as D-Day. The actual assault on the Normandy beaches was due to start at 6:30 am, 'H hour', but first the minesweeping flotillas had to clear the way. This minesweeper was part of Squadron Y which had been tasked with sweeping a channel for the ships that were to anchor off the American landing beaches, codenamed Omaha and Utah. Eight other inshore minesweepers were working side by side with *YMS-378* to clear a path for the main invasion force, with two dan laying ships dropping marker buoys to indicate the areas safe for the Allied ships to navigate. It was hard to see anything in the dark, the sea was rough, the water was shallow and full of mines, and the minesweepers had to keep accurate station with the others in their group while making

complicated sweeping turns. As the sun came up at 5 am, the Germans in their bunkers on shore finally spotted the minesweepers and they opened fire with their big gun batteries. Shortly after, at 17 minutes past H Hour, the first landing craft full of American infantrymen went ashore at Utah beach.

The Yard Minesweeper *YMS-378* was launched on 27th April 1943 at the Greenport Basin and Construction Company in New York. The YMS auxiliary motor minesweepers were designed for clearing mines from shallow inshore areas, so were small and light with a shallow draft of only 2.4m, but unfortunately this made them roll and pitch on even the calmest seas. *YMS-378* was sponsored by the famous French American operatic soprano and actress Lily Pons, who launched the ship in the traditional way by breaking a bottle of champagne over her bows. Not being tall, the press account of the launch described how '*every ounce of Lily Pons' 104 pounds in weight and all of the leverage of her five-foot, two-inch height (in French heels) went into her roundhouse swing that broke a bottle of champagne squarely across the bows of* YMS-378'. The launch of the ship was followed by Miss Pons singing the song 'Star-Spangled Banner' and she was joined in the chorus by the 2000 workers and guests of the shipyard who were watching the launch. The ship was commissioned at the Brooklyn Navy Yard in September with Lieutenant Joseph J. Guidrey, USNR, as her first commander. The inshore minesweeper was 41.5m long, built of wood held together with non-magnetic copper bolts so that she could be used to sweep for magnetic mines. Like the other 480 YMS ships that were constructed, she was armed with a 3in gun on the fo'c'sle, two 20mm anti-aircraft guns on the bridge along with two projectors for firing depth charges into the sea, and she was manned by four officers and 29 men.

The story of the minesweepers that were first into battle on D-Day is not well known, but these small vessels led the armada of seven thousand vessels involved in the Allied invasion of northern France in World War II. The operation was planned in meticulous detail to make sure that each of the ships arrived at the right place at the right time, with the huge invasion fleet to be guided to a meeting point in the English Channel before heading south for France. But between the meeting point and the invasion beaches was a large German minefield lying ten miles off the French coast, stretching right across the intended invasion route.



A map of the invasion area showing the location of Utah and Omaha beaches.

A clear channel lay beyond the minefield, which was used for safe passage by German ships along the coast, but closer inshore there were more mines laid off the beaches. A plan was devised to lead the invasion force with two groups of minesweepers, the larger Fleet minesweepers would clear two channels through the offshore minefield to allow the first waves of ships to pass through, while smaller minesweepers would head inshore and clear the mines from in front of the beaches. All of this had to be done quickly and efficiently by the minesweepers as they had the rest of the huge invasion force close on their heels. Clearing the channels had to be done just in time; not too soon so it alerted the enemy about the incoming Allied ships, and not too late so it held up the huge operation. The inshore minesweepers were to work right up to the beaches, and if engaged by the enemy guns they were ordered to carry on with their task and not head for safety offshore.

On 5th June 1944, after a one-day delay due to weather, 255 minesweepers left ports in southern England, led in a symbolic gesture by the Polish destroyer *Orp Slazak,* because Poland had been the first country attacked by Nazi Germany. The large Fleet minesweepers cleared the path through the offshore field as planned which allowed the smaller vessels to head south to the beaches, right under the noses of the Nazis. Incredibly, several of the sweeping groups got no reaction from the enemy having cleared a route right up to their allotted beaches. The minesweepers then turned parallel to the coast before turning back northward to clear the anchorages for the transport and bombardment ships. The areas where the battleships, cruisers, monitors, and destroyers were to be anchored had to be swept clear of mines just before each ship came on station. Together, these huge ships would unleash a huge naval bombardment on Hitler's Atlantic Wall, a series of huge concrete bunkers, guns and defences designed to protect the beaches against Allied invasion.

Having survived first contact with the enemy unscathed, Guidrey and the crew of *YMS-378* worked continuously until 9 pm on the night of 6th June. The following days were spent sweeping offshore at Omaha and Utah beaches for 15 hours each day, hunting for floating mines moored to the seabed as well as magnetic and acoustic mines, eliminating a total of 150 mines over the next six days. The work also had to go on constantly to sweep up any new mines dropped by German aircraft or by fast torpedo boats. On 12th June, the minesweeper squadron was working just one mile off the Cotentin Peninsula when the German shore batteries again opened fire. *YMS-378* took most of the hits and suffered enough damage that she had to be sent back to Plymouth for repairs, but fortunately, there were no casualties amongst the crew.

The bow of YMS-378 when John Cotton saw her in the 1980s, with her number still recognisable.

The Royal Dockyard in Plymouth repaired the little ship as best they could in the short time available and *YMS-378* sailed back to France to resume her duties. By 30th July she was working in tandem with *YMS-304* near St. Vaast off Utah Beach, clearing a new channel for merchant ships of acoustic and magnetic mines. The two minesweepers rigged their sweeping gear about 9 am and began to sweep, but moments after starting on the assigned course, *YMS-304* was rocked by a tremendous explosion directly beneath her keel as she had set off one or more German acoustic mines. Her hull was lifted clear of the water by the force of the blast beneath, *YMS-304* crashed back to the surface, split into two pieces and quickly began to flood. Within a minute of the initial detonation, *YMS-304* had sunk to the bottom taking eight of her crew with her and sending thirty injured survivors into the water. Two other mines exploded near *YMS-378* at the same time, she lost all electrical power, one of her main engines failed, and she started taking on water; despite the damage, the minesweeper still managed to rescue many of the crew of her sister ship. Other vessels came to the rescue, putting pumps on board the stricken *YMS-378* and keeping her afloat long enough to be beached on the shore. Repair crews came on board and found that the sea chests in the bottom of the ship had been blown out by the explosions, but they managed to patch her up and she was refloated on the next tide. *YMS-378* was taken in tow by two minesweepers from the squadron and they headed back to Plymouth in convoy, arriving on 3rd August with the badly damaged vessel still afloat. *YMS-378* was declared a total loss by naval surveyors so she was stripped of all equipment so her gear could be used to repair other ships, and she was finally decommissioned in September 1944. Lieutenant Guidrey was awarded the Bronze Star Medal with Combat "V" for this dangerous work during the Normandy invasion, and much of this story has been taken from Guidrey's eyewitness account, as told to his daughter 50 years later. Confusingly, *YMS-378* was reported to have been lost as the result of enemy action along with *YMS-304* and *YMS-350* in a US Navy Department Communique of 26th October 1944, which is why many websites say he was sunk off Normandy.

The hull of this minesweeper was sold in August 1947, and she was put alongside the Davies and Cann scrapyard at Freeman's Wharf in Stonehouse, Plymouth. All the remaining useful metal was removed from the ship, and the wooden hull was left to fall apart. The remains of *YMS-378* were found by historian John Cotton when he was investigating abandoned hulks in the 1980s, at the time she was easily identified from the numbers painted on her hull.

YMS-378 *in the 1980s, filling the entire length of Freeman's Wharf.*

Today, the flattened stern and parts of her bow can still be seen on the beach by Freeman's Wharf at Stonehouse. The remains of this hulk are covered in weed and a thick layer of hard concretion where rusty steelwork has fused together, but some of the ship structure can still be identified if you look carefully. The remains of her bow lie towards the north and her stern is to the south, filling the whole length of the stone wharf. Hull timbers can be seen at her port quarter closest to the Royal William Yard, the large steel engine beds are visible further forward and an anti-aircraft gun mount lies on the beach. The beach where the ship lies can be accessed via the steps alongside the Royal William Victualling Yard, the mud is deep in places and the foreshore is covered in rubbish so wearing boots is advised.

The remains of YMS-378 *as she is today, lying alongside the wall and hidden under a thick blanket of seaweed.*

This story has been produced by Peter Holt at The SHIPS Project CIC in 2023 with the help of research by C. John Cotton and an eyewitness account by the late Captain Joseph J. Guidrey USNR. Pictures courtesy of C. John Cotton and The SHIPS Project CIC.

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Reference: Holt P., 2023. *The First Ones In – the Story of YMS-378*. The SHIPS Project CIC, Plymouth.