

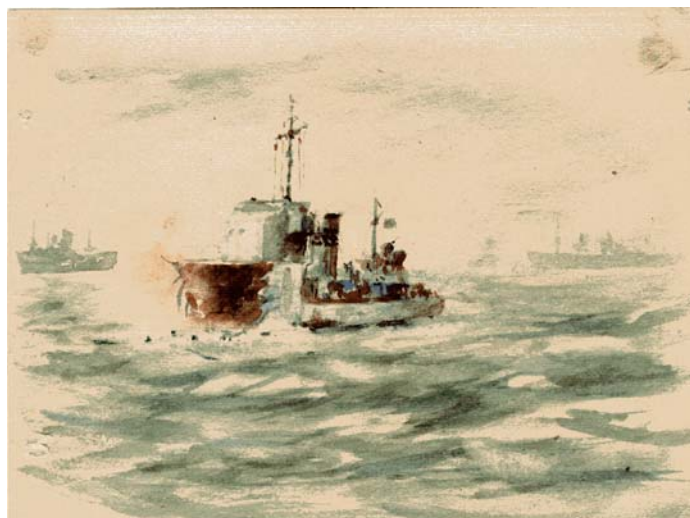
HMS Orchis

The recent story here of the convoy SC 94 has jogged the memory of Cachalot, Major Bill Wynn-Werninck, who writes:

I was so interested to read about the Flower Class Corvettes in *Cachalot 37*. What splendid ships and crews they were. The article brought home with a bang my first experience with a Flower Class Corvette.

I had sailed over to Arromanches from Tilbury with my unit, 19 Company RASC (MT) of some 250 vehicles, aboard the Canadian built Liberty ship *Fort Brandon*. We anchored about 2 miles off Arromanches on the east side of the Mulberry Harbour. That evening about 1000 pm a German bomber flew over us. There was some speculation about what the plane was up to, the feeling being that she was dropping acoustic mines. That night, from a flat calm evening, it blew up Force 5-6, causing the Captain concern that *Fort Brandon's* anchor chain could set off a nearby mine.

Next morning I watched our vehicles being unloaded onto the big Rhino barges run by the Sappers and went back to my cabin for a wash and brush up before breakfast. I was just doing this when there was a heck of a bang. I shot out on deck where I was appalled to see, 2 cables away, a corvette type of ship with her bows blown off to the 4.7 gun mounting. She was blowing off clouds of steam but slowly got under way, having eased the survivors away, and started heading for the beach adjoining the Mulberry caissons. We were all saddened on deck as no lifeboat was lowered to help those in the water and, in particular, one sailor who was manfully swimming towards the beach a long way ahead. Lifeboats were not lowered for fear of mines. I then hurried back to my cabin and did three small water-colour sketches of what I had seen.



In July 1994 I found these sketches and wrote to Navy News to ask if anyone could identify the ship. To my delight the next Navy News had several letters in it which gave her name as HMS Orchis (K76).

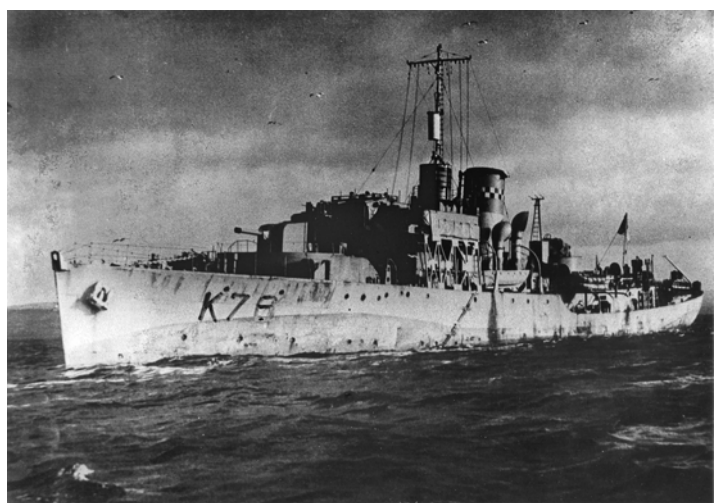
Naval Historical Branch stated that she was torpedoed by *U-992* which, 14 days later, was sunk in the Dover Straits. Fifty of *Orchis's* crew were killed or missing. Survivors were picked up by *MLs 150* and *196*, and landed in Normandy. The injured men were later sent to England in the hospital ship *St. Julian*. *HMS Orchis* was surveyed but found to be beyond economical repair and was broken up on site.

Mr Gordon Dibble wrote one of the letters, having been her sickbay attendant. He was having a shower at the instant of the explosion and was badly wounded from which he never really recovered. I had the great pleasure of meeting him and seeing the keys of the sickbay which he always carried. He very kindly gave me a photograph of *HMS Orchis*. I had met him at a meeting of the Flower Class Corvette Association, South Cerney in Gloucestershire and at the next meeting he was not there. I met Mrs Dibble who sadly told me he had died. She told me that in his final moments he was talking about something the nurses couldn't understand. She knew only too well that he was recalling the disaster of *HMS Orchis*.

For myself, having read that she was torpedoed, I am eternally grateful that *Fort Brandon* was not selected as the next target. She could have been sunk with the loss of most of our 6 ton vehicles.

Could I mention the excellent book by Chris Howard Bailey, "The Battle of the Atlantic" (The Royal Naval Museum). I met Cyril Stephens, Seaman ex *HMS Orchis*, who became a good friend. His house in South Cerney is named "Orchis". He too has since died.

Bill Wynn-Werninck



I found the web site of the Flower Class Corvette Association, www.fcca.demon.co.uk, and have since contacted them and directed their members to our own site and the earlier newsletters posted there. Ed.