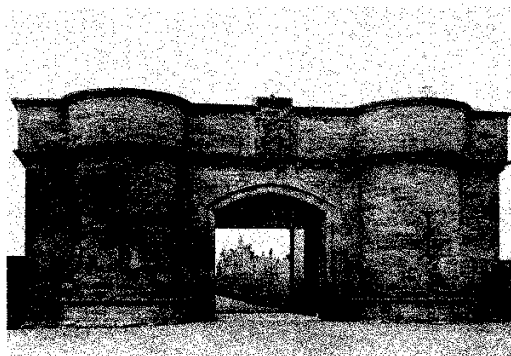




## **No. 2 AIR SEA RESCUE UNIT – SHAPINSAY**



Although the unit opened in 1941, the first entry in the Station Log was not made until the 1<sup>st</sup>. April, 1942. The crew's billets were located just behind the Gatehouse at the entrance to Balfour Castle drive. The A.S.R.U. camp was shared with the ship's Balloon Depot, and there was usually one or two airborne ships 'kites' tethered in the square in front of the Gatehouse. They even had a Balloon store and Hydrogen store within the confines of the camp. One night, a stray spark from one of the huts set the balloon hut alight, and rubberised Sea Island Poplin, cellulose dope and the odd cylinder made for quite a spectacular blaze. On the 11<sup>th</sup>. November 1942, the Unit's O.I.C. was Flt.Lt.Ferguson.



THE OLD GATEHOUSE OF BALFOUR CASTLE (Sheila Garson)

The first high speed launches, allocated on the 1<sup>st</sup>. April, 1942, were the 64ft HSLs, Nos.113 and 114, built by the British Power Boat Company at Hythe, and taken on charge by the RAF on 1<sup>st</sup>. May, and the 1<sup>st</sup>. April 1939 respectively. 114 became the first wartime casualty. She had been out looking for a Sunderland off Rockall, and ended up desperately short of fuel, sheltering from a gale in the lee of North Rona. She eventually made it back to Shapinsay, where she was driven ashore at full speed for if they had slowed down, the self bailers would have failed, and the launch would have sunk. The wheelhouse casing had been shifted back some 4", and the wooden dinghy had torn loose and damaged the aft gun turret door, trapping the gunner inside. Rumour has it that the crew reckoned it was the safest place for him, seeing as he suffered from chronic sea sickness. The launch was subsequently slipped for repairs.

Crew rivalry was very strong at No.2 ASRU with each boats crew sharing their own side of the nissen hut, 113 had the left hand side with 114 on the right, and no opportunity was missed to verbally abuse each other. This was generally good natured but occasionally there would be a flare up and missiles would fly.

On the 31<sup>st</sup>. March 1941, HSL.113 went out to search for a missing 76Squadron Halifax bomber some 20 miles off Sumburgh Head. She was accompanied on this mission by HSL.117 from Lerwick.

### **MUTINY**

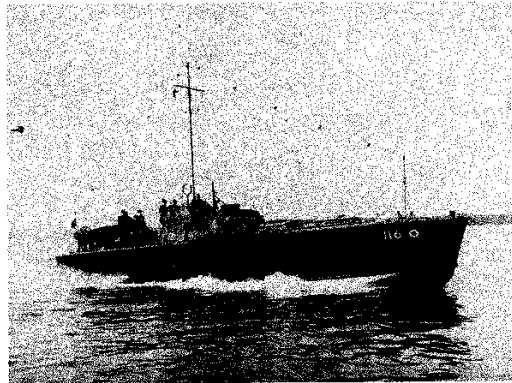
Another call out in October/November was to a fishing boat in distress, but for reasons known only to himself, the launch Skipper P.O. Oakes refused to take the men off. The fishing boat later sank with the loss of her three crewmen. On their return, the crews voiced their anger about the mission, and were faced with the full might of Kings Regulations. 113 and 114 crews were paraded before a Provost Marshall Squadron Leader from Kirkwall who read out the "Mutiny" section from the Regulations, leaving them in do doubt as to the error of their ways. On this trip, HSL.113 suffered severe structural damage, and after temporary repairs, she went down to Aberdeen for slipping.

On arrival in December, her crew were offered Xmas leave providing the fishing boat incident was never mentioned again. The chance to spend Xmas with their families proved too much and they reluctantly agreed. Alas, the Skipper's offer had a sting in the tail as they were ordered back to the boat on Xmas eve. 113 was deemed beyond economical repair and scrapped. Her crew collected "Whaleback" HSL.137 and returned with her to Shapinsay.

### **JUNGLE TELEGRAPH**

Shapinsay, in common with most small communities, had its own form of media, and secret information soon became common knowledge. The Station Warrant Officer, W.O.Brayley would invariably answer the telephone with the words, "Good morning Mr. Sinclair". (Mr. Sinclair being the local Postmaster would listen in to all calls to the base, and was reckoned to be the source of all "leaks"). This would be borne out when crews would call at the local farm for fresh eggs, and be told that they were off to Lerwick again that night. When they returned

to camp, they would ask the W.O., who after much cursing about the official secrets act, would confirm that they would be so deployed. I should perhaps explain that this was the time when the German battleships Scharnhorst, and Gneisenau were trying to break out.

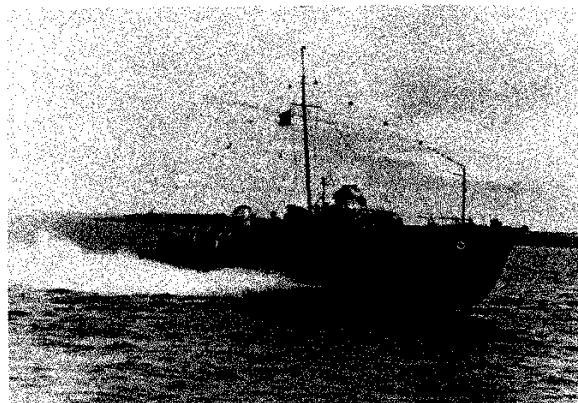


A TYPE.1 - 64ft HSL SIMILAR TO THOSE USED AT No.2 ASRU (Authors collection)

#### **64ft HSL TYPE 1 OUTLINE SPECIFICATIONS**

RAF BOAT NUMBERS	100 – 121
BUILDERS	BRITISH POWER BOAT Co.
DISPLACEMENT	19 TONS
HULL DIMENSIONS	LOA 64' 0"
	BEAM 14' 0"
	DRAUGHT 3' 7"
	DOUBLE DIAGONAL
CONSTRUCTION	MAHOGANY
MATERIAL	5/8"
SIDE PLANKING	3/4"
BOTTOM PLANKING	
ENGINES	TRIPLE NAPIER SEA LION PETROL
MAX. SPEED	35 KNOTS
CRUISING SPEED	30 KNOTS
RANGE	310 MILES

Launch No.113 served until 24<sup>th</sup>. May 1943, and her sister 114 served until 16<sup>th</sup>. October 1943. In addition to these boats, two 63ft. 'Whalebacks' joined the unit in 1942. They were No.173 on 26<sup>th</sup>. April, and No.137 on the 1<sup>st</sup>. October. The first rescue was attributed to HSL 173 in Farra Sound (no date).



HSL 173 AT SPEED OFF THE HEAD OF WORK ( Sheila Garson)

#### **63ft. TYPE 2 HSL OUTLINE SPECIFICATIONS**

RAF BOAT NUMBERS	12-149, 156-190, 2546-2551
BUILDERS	BRITISH POWER BOAT Co.
DISPLACEMENT	21.5 TONS

HULL DIMENSIUONS	LENGTH	63' 0"
	BEAM	17' 6"
	DRAUGHT	3' 10"
CONSTRUCTION	DOUBLE DIAGONAL	
MATERIAL	MAHOGANY	
SIDE PLANKING	3/4"	
BOTTOM PLANKING	3/4"	
ENGINES	TRIPLE NAPIER SEA LION PETROL	
MAX. SPEED	35 KNOTS	
CRUISING SPEED	30 KNOTS	
RANGE	420 MILES.	

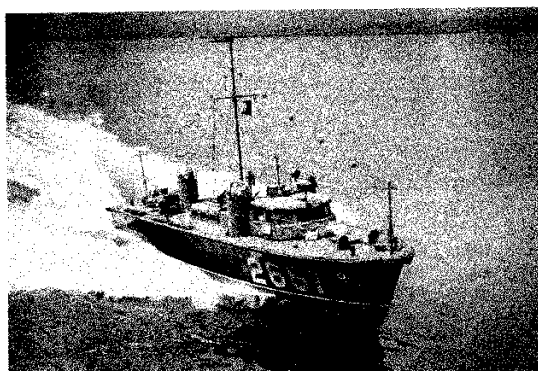
The Type 2 HSL was the best known of all the wartime launches as its rakish lines endeared it to all those who served on them. They were very tough boats and it was often said that the crew would break before the boat. This was not always the case however, as crews tended to drive the boats too fast in bad weather causing structural damage that required them being out of service for repairs to be carried out. The outline of the 'Whaleback' was used as the design for the ASR Flashes worn with pride by the crews.

These first four launches were on station until being replaced by the larger, more seaworthy 67ft. Thornycroft HSLs. in 1943. No.137 left first on the 23<sup>rd</sup>.March, followed by 113 on the 24<sup>th</sup>.May. The next to leave was 173 on 26<sup>th</sup>.June, and the last to leave was No.114 on the 16<sup>th</sup>.October. No.137 sailed to Dumbarton and was prepared for overseas duty. The boat and her crew were shipped out to Algiers to cover the advance of the Desert Rats. (137 should not have gone to Algiers, it should have been a new boat 173, but the movements clerk mixed the numbers up)

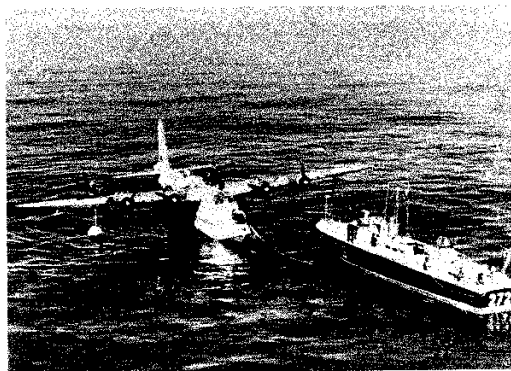
Although the 67ft. High Speed Launch was a Thornycroft design, they were built by many yards during the war. The two launches at Shapinsay, No.2723, and 2725 were built by the Walton Yacht Works at Walton on Thames, and were taken on charge by the RAF on 7/6/43. and 18/10/43 respectively. 2723 took up station on 19<sup>th</sup>. September 1943, and her sister joined her on the 18<sup>th</sup>.October. In 1944 John Phillip recalls a 'Crash Call' aboard one of these launches.

*"We were taken to our boat by a diesel powered dinghy. We then headed out through Eynhallow Sound straight into a force 8 gale. Topping one crest, we dropped 20 feet into the trough. Two engines out of action and 17 frames cracked. We limped round to Stromness and made fast to the POLE STAR. Next day we returned via Scapa Flow, entering 'Hoy Gate'; astern of the French battleship RICHIELEU newly refitted at Norfolk Virginia. Fortunately calmer waters when a Junkers88 was shot down by a Canadian Spitfire of Colonsay. We salvaged a tail wheel marked "Dunlop Berlin", a Tunic with an Iron Cross, and a shirt marked "Heidenright". Our winter problem was the long hours of darkness and we had to request the Auskerry and Heliar Holm lights, which were only shown for 30 seconds."*

The 67ft HSLs were slower than their 63ft counterparts, although they were more yacht like in looks. The most numerous of all the wartime launches they stood up well to the harsher conditions of the Northern North Sea, and North West coasts of Scotland. Their rescue missions often taking them far out from their bases.



67ft HSL SAME TYPE AS AT SHAPINSAY (Authors collection)



HSL. 2725 WITH SUNDERLAND

#### **67ft. THORNYCROFT HSL. Mk.11. OUTLINE SPECIFICATIONS.**

RAF BOAT NUMBERS

2563, 2583-2592, 2615-2618, 2632-2639, 2651/52, 2671-2676

BUILDERS	2717-2737
DISPLACEMENT	VARIOUS, THORNYCROFT, MEAKES MARLOW, WALTON etc.
HULL DIMENSIONS	28.75 TONS
	LENGTH. 67' 0"
	BEAM 15' 0"
	DRAUGHT 4' 3"
CONSTRUCTION	DOUBLE DIAGONAL
MATERIAL	MAHOGANY
SIDE PLANKING	3/4"
BOTTOM PLANKING	1"
ENGINES	TRIPLE NAPIER SEA LION PETROL
MAX. SPEED	25.5 KNOTS
CRUISING SPEED	21.5 KNOTS
RANGE	400 MILES.

These were the last Air Sea Rescue launches to serve at Shapinsay, 2723 left the unit on the 4<sup>th</sup>. February 1945, and her sister 2725 followed on the 10<sup>th</sup>. October. Shortly after this No.2 ASRU closed down.

*During the Second World War, Air Sea Rescue crews worldwide saved 13,269 lives, of these, 8,604 were aircrew. This can be further broken down as 5721 RAF and 1922 American who operated over British waters between February 1941 and the end of the war in Europe. The Royal Air Force Air Sea Rescue branch was often referred to as "The world's largest life-boat service". After the war this work was carried on by the Marine Branch until it was closed down in 1986, ending almost 60 years of seaborne airmen.*



SUNDERLAND FLYING BOAT - ON THE STEP (Authors collection)

*In compiling this short history, I was helped by Sheila Garson of the Shapinsay Heritage Trust, Mr. Sandy Firth, Kirkwall, Mr. John Phillip (ex. RAF W/Op) from Aberchirder in Aberdeenshire, and Tom Wilkinson (a mutineer) from Telford.*

*If anyone reading this has any more information on the unit or other ASRUs and launches I would very much like to hear from them.*



ARM BADGE WORN BY ASR CREWS

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