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# Operation Kronstadt

Harry Ferguson

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## About the Book

Part *Black Hawk Down*, part *Riddle of the Sands*, this is an extraordinarily gripping non-fiction thriller, written by a former MI6 officer.

*Operation Kronstadt* not only reveals the early days of Britain's intelligence services but uncovers a truly dramatic story from the Russian Revolution involving a daring rescue attempt and a 'mission impossible' against the best defended naval target in Russia.

By May 1919, when the power struggle between former Tsarists and Bolsheviks hangs in the balance, the only British agent in Russia, Paul Dukes, is trapped and in mortal danger. Mansfield Cumming, the first 'C', dreams up an audacious – probably suicidal – plan to rescue him, and a young naval officer, Gus Agar, is sent with a specially selected team into the jaws of the Soviet fleet. This is their inspiring and remarkable story.

## About the Author

Harry Ferguson is a former MI6 officer and an undercover agent for the National Investigation Service (NIS). He has written two books about his experiences with the NIS: *Kilo 17* (2003) and *Lima 3* (2005). In 2005, he starred alongside Mike Baker of the CIA in the BBC2/3 series *Spy* and he also wrote the book of the series: *Spy: A Handbook*.

*Also available by Harry Ferguson*

Kilo 17

Lima 3

Spy: A Handbook

# OPERATION KRONSTADT

Harry Ferguson



arrow books

For

Benny

If only we'd had one more bullet ...



*'The spy is the greatest of soldiers. If he is the most detested by the enemy,  
it is only because he is the most feared.'* King George V

## Author's Note

As a former MI6 officer, it seems incredible to me that the story of Cromie, Dukes and Agar has ever been forgotten. It is as heroically British as the Great Escape or the defence of Rorke's Drift and yet if you were to stop people in the street today, not one in a thousand would have heard of them. These men very nearly changed the course of the history of Western Europe and therefore of the world. If their reports had been listened to and their daring actions supported there is a good chance that the Bolsheviks would have lost the Civil War and the Soviet Union might never have existed.

I rediscovered this story whilst researching the history of MI6 for a television documentary. I had been aware of the bare outline of the tale for many years but it was only as I began to study the original sources that I discovered the fascinating details of the mission. Originally I thought that this would be a perfect operation to celebrate the centenary of MI6. As you will see, our actions were so clumsy (and sometimes, reprehensible) that this has not turned out to be the case. And yet, given the Service's poor performance in recent years, perhaps it is a good thing if some of the mystique which has prevented proper consideration of the Service's numerous faults is brushed aside, even if only for a short while.

In fact I was concerned that this tale presents a rather too negative, if accurate, picture of MI6. I have always enjoyed a productive relationship with my former employers and I did not want to be seen to be unduly knocking the Service. In view of this, I have consulted

representatives of the Service and discussed this issue with them. They are content for the record to stand in its current form.

If you enjoy this story I hope you will take time to read the endnotes. A lot of detail which was taken out of the story at the drafting stage has been placed there. I believe it adds considerably to the background and if you find this story interesting, it is well worth browsing through.

Similarly, I am sure that there is a great deal more information in family memories, photographs and other records which I was not able to uncover during my research. If anyone has information relating to the characters or events in this book then they are warmly encouraged to write to me care of the publishers.

Finally, as young Secret Intelligence Service trainees we all used to receive regular lectures on the history of the Service and its most exciting operations. Take it from me, in the annals of the Service there is no more thrilling story than that of Paul Dukes.

This was the sort of spy we all wanted to be ...

H.F.

February 2008

[N.B. I have used the term MI6 to refer to the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) throughout this work as I believe the general reader will be more comfortable with the term. I apologise in advance to those who will doubtless point out that the latter is the technically correct term.]

My thanks to all those who have written to me pointing out what a marvellous movie this forgotten story would make. Readers may like to know that several production companies have indeed shown an interest. Sadly no British company could raise sufficient funds. Meanwhile the three major US studios which looked at the project all decided

they would not make the film because there were no Americans in the story. Such is the world we live in.

H.F.

January 2009

## Acknowledgements

One of the great pleasures in writing this book has been contacting the following historians, enthusiasts and family members who have been unfailingly helpful and friendly. Each one of them has contributed at least a small part to the jigsaw which makes up this story and if there are any mistakes remaining they are most definitely mine.

There are no surviving members of the crews of the Coastal Motor Boats and many technical details about their operation have been lost, so in the first place I would like to thank Captain Stephen R. New, maritime historian and expert on the history of the motor torpedo boat. He gave unstintingly of his time and knowledge as well as allowing me to consult his unpublished MA dissertation. I would also like to thank: Commander Rodney Agar RN (retired), for his memories of his uncle; Phil Tomaselli, already well known to researchers in the history of espionage, who supplied the final part of the jigsaw by finding Paul Dukes's private diaries; Dr John Fisher of UWE, Bristol and author of *Gentleman Spies*; Frances Welch, author of *The Romanovs & Mr Gibbes*; Sergey Gavrilov for his research in Finland and Russia into Peter Sokolov; Ann Trevor for her research in US archives; the Head of Security Department and several old friends at the Secret Intelligence Service; Francis M Newton, Jean Cowell, Daphne Porter, Lizzie Sanders and Roz Acland, who all contributed valiantly to my search for Laura Cade; Vin Callcut for sharing the memories of his father, CMB Motor Mechanic Horace G. Callcut; Peter and Christopher Hampsheir for their knowledge of the Hampsheir family; Nigel Watts for his

knowledge of the Armistead family; Professor Paul Dukes, recently retired Professor of Russian History at the University of Aberdeen (sadly – and astonishingly – no relation); Dr Letas Palmaitis for his knowledge of the Ingrian people; author and historian Phillip Knightley; Roy Dean and Gerald Blackburn of the HMS Dorsetshire Association; Alina Rennie and Alan Howe of Caterham School; John Roycroft for his thoughts on Paul Dukes; the staff of the Tourist Offices in Bridgwater, Somerset and Maldon, Essex; the staff and trustees of the following institutions: the National Archives at Kew; the Department of Documents and the Photograph Archive at the Imperial War Museum at Lambeth; the National Portrait Gallery, London; the Caird Library at the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich; the British Library Newspaper Archive at Colindale; the Hoover Institution Archive at Stanford University, California. UK material which is not under private copyright is unpublished Crown-copyright material and is reproduced by kind permission of the Controller of H.M. Stationery Office. I am also grateful to the following publishers for permission to quote from their works: Cassell (*The Story of ST-25* and *The Unending Quest*), Evans Brothers (*Footprints in the Sea*) and Hodder and Stoughton (*Baltic Episode*). The publisher has undertaken every effort to trace copyright holders. If any copyright holder believes that they have not been consulted they are urged to contact the publisher directly.

Finally, my thanks to a few special people: Helen Hawken, my absolute favourite television producer, who first suggested that this story might be suitable for a book; Tony Whittome, James Nightingale and everyone at Hutchinson for their enthusiasm and all their hard work; my agent Julian Alexander for his continuing faith in defiance of all the evidence; and last, but not least, my six wonderful children and my long-suffering secretary Rita – I still await a decent cup of coffee from one of them.

H.F.  
February 2008

## List of Illustrations

Augustus Agar

Petrograd street scene

A soldier working for the Cheka forces his way through a window

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A suspect is stopped and searched in a Petrograd street

The frozen bodies of victims of the Cheka

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Richard Marshall

Hugh Beeley

CMBs on their storage racks at Osea Island

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Paul Dukes on the eve of his knighthood (*National Portrait Gallery*).

*Unless otherwise attributed, all photographs are courtesy of the Imperial War Museum, London*

# Prologue

*The place: Petrograd (formerly St Petersburg, the capital of Russia).  
The time: Saturday, 31 August 1918. The First World War was almost over. The Russian Revolution of November 1917 was almost one year old.*

In a first-floor office of the British Embassy four men were deep in conversation. A squeal of brakes as several large vehicles arrived in the courtyard outside caused one of the men to look up suspiciously.

Captain Francis Cromie of the British Naval Intelligence Department (NID) was the de facto chief of all British intelligence operations in northern Russia.<sup>1</sup> Cromie was 36, a tall and distinguished officer, always immaculately dressed and a well-known figure in the city to his friends and his enemies alike. It was shortly after four o'clock. Together with Harold Hall, an MI6 officer, Cromie had just begun a meeting with two of the leading British agents in the city, whose names were Steckelmann and Sabir.<sup>2</sup> Cromie had called the meeting to discuss launching a military coup that would almost certainly overthrow the tottering regime of the Bolsheviks and return Russia to Tsarist rule.<sup>3</sup> But Cromie knew that the Cheka, the Bolshevik secret police, were closing in on him.<sup>4</sup> His flat had been ransacked whilst he was at the Embassy a few weeks earlier and so he had moved to a 'safe house'. However, someone must have talked because, only two days before, the Cheka had raided this second flat in the middle of the night. Cromie had only narrowly evaded capture by escaping over the roof in his pyjamas as they came charging up the stairs.<sup>5</sup> On the previous evening, his

assistant, Commander Andrew Le Page, had disappeared while walking to the Embassy and Cromie was sure that the Cheka had kidnapped him.<sup>6</sup> Cheka surveillance officers could be seen watching the Embassy from parked vehicles and from alleyways across the street. They made no attempt to hide. Their purpose was to increase the sense of oppression and isolation within the Embassy.

Tension in the city was at its height now. Only the day before, on 30 August, Moses Uritsky, the chief of the Petrograd Cheka, had been assassinated by a Russian military cadet named Leonid Kanegisser as the official was about to enter the elevator to his office.<sup>7</sup> Uritsky had been the second most powerful man in the city after Grigory Zinoviev, the leader of the Petrograd Soviet, so this was seen as a blow, not just against the Cheka but against the entire Bolshevik leadership. Kanegisser had fled the scene of the shooting but had been caught nearby in a disused building formerly known as the English Club. The Club actually had nothing to do with Britain officially, but just the name was enough to convince the Cheka and many Bolshevik supporters that the British secret service must be behind Uritsky's assassination. They had already widely penetrated British intelligence operations in the city and knew that there were plans to overthrow Bolshevik rule and to capture or assassinate both Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky. This seemed as if it might be the first stage in that scheme.

In the evening of the same day a young woman named Fania Kaplan had fired two shots at the Bolshevik leader, Lenin, as he was leaving a rally at the Michelson factory in Moscow. One bullet had hit him in the chest, puncturing his left upper lung and the other had ripped through his neck, missing the jugular vein by less than half an inch. Gravely wounded, Lenin was thought unlikely to live.<sup>8</sup> As a result of this second attack in a single day, the Cheka and their

supporters were now almost uncontrollable in their demands to clear out the 'nests of conspirators' in foreign embassies.<sup>9</sup> Cromie knew that it would not be long before the Bolshevik leadership let them off the leash and they would arrive at his door. There was only one hope: if he could launch the coup before they got to him, then the situation might be saved. But it was a matter of hours not days and that was why this emergency meeting with his chief agents was so important.

Cromie stood up and crossed quickly to the net curtains of the large sash window that overlooked the courtyard. He muttered something under his breath.

Harold Hall looked up. Although the planned coup was an NID operation he had been called to the meeting to represent the interests of MI6. His station chief, Commander Ernest Boyce RN, was working elsewhere in the Embassy. Suddenly the sounds of crashing doors and shouting began to filter up from the floor below where the Embassy staff were still working. Most of the shouting was in Russian. Women began screaming.

'There are trucks outside,' said Cromie urgently. 'Patrol boats have moved up the canal in front of the Embassy building and have their guns trained on us.'

Steckelmann and Sabir glanced at each other in apparent horror. If they were discovered in the Embassy it would certainly mean torture and then a firing squad. Hall watched as Cromie pulled a revolver from his pocket.<sup>10</sup> He had clearly been expecting trouble. He had already destroyed any sensitive papers which were held in the Embassy so he was not worried about that, but he would never give up any of his agents without a fight.<sup>11</sup> Cromie flicked the revolver's chamber open to check that the gun was fully loaded. As he did so, Hall crossed the room and opened the door into the passage. They could both see a Chekist officer with a revolver advancing towards them.

Hall quickly slammed the door shut. Cromie strode across the room, grasped the handle and then turned to Hall:

‘Remain here and keep the door after me.’<sup>12</sup>

He swung the heavy door open and immediately came face to face with the startled officer. Cromie shoved the barrel of his revolver into the man’s chest before the Chekist had a chance to aim his own weapon and then forced him to step away.

‘Get back, you swine!’ barked Cromie and he pushed his way through the door, before slamming it shut behind him to prevent the officer seeing who was inside.

Shortly afterwards Hall heard the sound of a shot. He turned back to the two agents, trying to think of words to reassure them. He had no weapon of his own and was not sure what he was going to do if the Cheka forced their way past Cromie. But although Sabir and Steckelmann had drawn their pistols they now showed no signs of panic. In fact they looked remarkably relaxed. A horrible suspicion began to form in Hall’s mind: these men were Chekist agents. He remembered that Sabir had gone outside for a few minutes while they were waiting for Cromie to arrive, supposedly to check on his ‘detectives’ who were keeping watch. He wondered if Sabir had actually left to give the Cheka the all-clear for the raid to go ahead.<sup>13</sup> Outside the room a ferocious barrage of shooting began.<sup>14</sup>

Moments earlier, Cromie had fired a single shot to make the Chekist drop his pistol. Cromie had then forced him to walk slowly backwards along the corridor towards the top of the Embassy’s sweeping grand staircase. He could now make out the shouting of Cheka guards in the main Embassy rooms downstairs, together with the screams and angry protests of the Embassy staff. But they could not have got far. If he could force them back through the main entrance, then the staff might be able to barricade the

heavy mahogany doors long enough for Cromie to get his agents to safety.

Arriving at the top of the staircase, Cromie took in the sight of the main entrance hall. At first it was hard to make out exactly what had happened. Because of the fuel shortage caused by conditions in Petrograd there were only a few lights burning in the Embassy. But Cromie soon realised that the Embassy doors were wide open and the main hall was full of ten or more Chekist officers.<sup>15</sup> One or two of them glanced up at the two men who had appeared at the head of the stairs. Cromie's gaze came to rest on the uniform of a Cheka Commissar, a well-known local firebrand called Geller who was barking orders from the centre of the hall and who had been itching for the chance to get at Cromie for months.<sup>16</sup> Cromie realised that there were now so many troops in the Embassy that there was no chance of clearing them out. For a moment he lowered his pistol, at a loss what to do.

Seeing his men looking at the top of the stairs, the Commissar stopped shouting orders, turned and looked up. Geller's stare met Cromie's and for a moment all activity in the hall stopped ...

... and then all hell broke loose.

Glancing over his shoulder, the soldier whom Cromie had taken prisoner turned and shouted for help. Several of the Cheka officers in the hallway raised their pistols and opened fire, barely taking time to aim. Bullets smashed into the marble balustrade of the staircase and ricocheted around the two men. Several bullets struck the unfortunate Cheka officer in front of Cromie and he slumped gurgling onto the top steps. Cromie returned fire and pulled the body of the dying soldier in front of him for cover. Grasping the collar of the man's uniform, Cromie fired his weapon and hit a soldier in the hall below who staggered backwards into one of the offices.

In the hallway, Cromie's return fire had caused panic among the Cheka officers who were diving for cover in all directions, some of them running back out of the main door of the Embassy, others fleeing into the ground-floor offices. Caught in the middle of the hall, Geller struggled with the flap of his holster and finally managed to drag his gun clear. Cromie fired again as he scrambled back up the stairs and the bullet ricocheted near Geller's head. Geller returned fire wildly as he dived sideways, hitting one of his own men in the back.

Cromie knew that he was in a desperate position. The badly wounded Chekist he was trying to use for cover struggled from his grip and staggered away up the last few stairs. Cromie now had nowhere left to go except up or down – the balustrade of the staircase offered him no protection at all. From the cover of the doorways below, the Chekists now began to take better aim and it would only be a matter of moments before one of them hit Cromie. More Bolshevik troops were also starting to pour in through the doorway. Cromie knew now that there was no chance of retaking the entrance to the Embassy. He had to get back and warn his agents to get out any way they could. Glancing back over his shoulder, Cromie tried to judge the distance to the corner of the upper hallway. He would have to make a run for it.

As Cromie stood up to make his move, some of the Chekists tried to rush the staircase. Cromie opened fire, forcing them back. Bullets thudded into the wall of the staircase, scattering fragments of plaster all around him, but miraculously none of the bullets hit him. Geller screamed at his men to force their way up the staircase and just for a moment it looked as if Cromie was going to make it.

But what Cromie did not know was that in the moments it had taken him to work out what was happening and leave Le Page's office some Chekists had charged straight up the

staircase and were busy looting offices further down the corridor.<sup>17</sup> When they heard shooting break out on the staircase several of them crept back cautiously along the corridor to find out what was going on. Sadly for Cromie, it was just as he made his move that they arrived. One of them knelt at the corner of the corridor and took careful aim. His first shot hit Cromie in the back of the head.

Cromie lurched upwards and his finger reflexively closed on the trigger squeezing off a final shot which went wild. Another of the troops behind him fired and he was hit in the head a second time, the bullet lodging in the centre of his forehead.<sup>18</sup>

It did not matter. From the moment the first shot hit him, Cromie was already dead. His body slumped forwards and rolled brokenly down the Embassy staircase. His revolver skittered away from his hand. His body came to rest about three stairs up from the bottom of the flight and, as the echoes of the shooting died away, for a moment there was silence.<sup>19</sup>

It was Geller who broke the spell. He shouted at his men to continue the search. As Cheka troops stormed up the staircase, Cromie's body was kicked aside and rolled the rest of the way to the bottom. Two of the soldiers hauled his corpse to a place just under a window by the main doors and searched his pockets. They took all his personal papers, his money and his pocket watch, but they left a baby's glove which he had been carrying.<sup>20</sup> No one has ever found out why it was there.

His body remained under the window near the door as the thirty or so Embassy staff, including Boyce and Hall, were lined up and led out of the building with their hands on their heads. They were to be loaded into the trucks and taken to Cheka headquarters at No. 2 Gorohovaya Street for interrogation. The staff recognised the body of Cromie and several of the Embassy secretaries burst into tears at



the sight of his corpse, which had been trampled by the Bolshevik troops. The Embassy chaplain, Reverend Lombard, tried to get to the body to administer the last rites, but he was clubbed with rifle butts and thrown back into the line.<sup>21</sup>

And that was the end of the head of British intelligence in Russia. Cromie had held the organisation together at a time when the country was in chaos, but there were to be no medals for him.<sup>22</sup> After a swift autopsy, embarrassed Soviet officials had his body buried in a grave (the location of which has since been lost) provided by the Dutch Legation and in London he was soon forgotten, never receiving the Victoria Cross which many felt he deserved, not just for his single-handed defence of the Embassy but also for his many brave actions in Russia over the preceding ten months.<sup>23</sup>

But at least Geller did not escape retribution. Just over a year later, on 10 December 1920, he was to die in front of the rifles of the same men he had led against Cromie, executed by a Cheka firing squad on suspicion of conspiring against the Revolution.<sup>24</sup>

The assassination of Uritsky, the attempted assassination of Lenin and the murder of Francis Cromie marked the beginning of a period of Russian history known as the Red Terror. On 1 September, *Krasnaya Gazeta*, the official newspaper of the Red Army, issued a demand for retribution: 'Without mercy, without sparing, we will kill our enemies in scores of hundreds. Let them be thousands, let them drown themselves in their own blood. For the blood of Lenin and Uritsky ... let there be floods of blood of the bourgeois - more blood, as much as possible!' Two days later, *Izvestia*, the Bolshevik Party newspaper, printed a telegram from one of the then lesser-known Bolshevik leaders named Josef Stalin. He demanded 'open, mass, systematic terror.' On 5 September the Bolshevik Commissars for Justice and Internal Affairs issued a joint

statement: the infamous Decree on the Red Terror. It stated: '... in the given situation it is absolutely essential to safeguard the rear by means of terror; ... it is essential to protect the Soviet Republic against its class enemies by isolating these in concentration camps; all persons involved in White Guard organisations, plots and insurrections are to be shot; ...' As one historian has since remarked, it was an open licence for the Cheka to kill.<sup>25</sup>

Martial law was imposed throughout the country. As the Cheka were unleashed, suspects were rounded up, tortured and summarily executed. In Petrograd alone official statistics show that over 6,000 people were killed, but the true figure was almost certainly far higher and will never be known for sure.

But the Red Terror served its purpose. The population were cowed and all over Russia the remainder of the British spy networks that Cromie had so patiently built up closed down as agents either fled the country or went underground.

Boyce and Hall were released from captivity, exchanged along with the other British Embassy prisoners a month later. Other agents made their own way back.<sup>26</sup> There was now no British secret agent left in Bolshevik Russia.<sup>27</sup> But as all these men headed westward for the safety of continental Europe, just one man was struggling through the snowy landscape of the Russo-Finnish border in the opposite direction. His mission: to set up a new British intelligence organisation.

He had no support.

He had no weapons.

He had no training.

He was a concert pianist and his code name was ST-25.

## The Man with the Punch-like Chin

In Parliament Square in London, Big Ben struck a quarter past eleven.

Just a short distance away, Lieutenant 'Gus' Agar RN was becoming increasingly uneasy. He had been standing for some time in front of the large oak desk in an attic room just off Whitehall watching a thickset elderly man in civilian clothes read through an official-looking file of papers. The old man had not even acknowledged his presence yet and Gus had no idea why he had been summoned so urgently from his weekend leave on that morning in May 1919.<sup>1 2</sup> He certainly did not know the identity of this strange individual with his horn-rimmed spectacles and comically jutting chin - rather like the Mr Punch character in a seaside puppet show.<sup>3</sup>

But as Gus stood there feeling awkward, it gradually dawned on him that he had met this strange man somewhere before. He remembered being briefly introduced to an elderly naval captain just a few weeks ago by his commanding officer at their base on Osea Island in Essex.<sup>4</sup> The old officer had walked with a pronounced limp and had used a silver-topped cane to support himself. Gus had assumed that the visit had simply been some routine naval inspection and the meeting had been so brief that he could not even recall the officer's name. But although the old man was now out of uniform and wearing a grey three-piece suit, this was definitely the same person. Gus could

see the walking stick leaning in a corner of the room behind the desk.

As the old man continued to read, Gus took the opportunity to glance around the room. His commanding officer at HMS Osea had ordered him to report to the Admiralty that morning where he would have a meeting with a Commander Goff of the Naval Intelligence Department about 'Special Service'.<sup>5</sup> However, once he had finally found the commander's office amidst the warren of passages at the Admiralty, Gus had been surprised to be taken back out of the building and then on a deliberately confusing route through the side streets of Whitehall. They had entered another building which housed, amongst other things, the Royal Automobile Club and had taken the lift to the top floor. They had then taken the stairs to the roof where they proceeded to walk up and down through a disorientating maze of temporary offices and gantries. Finally the pair had arrived at the ante-room of this office where, after a brief word with the Commander, an attractive secretary had ushered Gus straight inside. Since then he had been left to wait with nothing to do but watch this old man reading through the file slowly and methodically. He wondered why on earth he was there.

At long last, the grey-haired officer removed his spectacles and slipped a gold rimmed monocle into his right eye.<sup>6</sup> He looked up for a moment. Then, dramatically slapping the desk hard with his hand, he suddenly addressed Gus for the first time:

'Sit down, my boy - I think you will do!'<sup>7</sup>

The greatest rescue operation in the history of the British Secret Intelligence Service had begun.

Augustus Willington Shelton Agar was the youngest of thirteen children. He had been born in 1890 and was orphaned by the age of twelve. His mother, who was

Austrian, had died shortly after his birth and his father, an Irish tea planter based in Sri Lanka, died of cholera during a business trip to China in 1902. 'Gus' (as he was understandably known to his family and friends) had been sent away to boarding school in England at the age of eight and in 1904, at the suggestion of his beloved eldest brother Shelton, Gus had joined the Royal Navy as an officer cadet.<sup>8</sup> He was to remain with the Navy for the next forty years.

By 1919 Gus was skipper of one of the fastest pieces of naval weaponry in the world. Officially it was designated simply as a 'Coastal Motor Boat' or 'CMB'. Unofficially it was known as a 'skimmer'. Developed in great secrecy in 1916, the skimmers were the brainchild of three young naval officers which had been transformed into reality by the boat builder Sir John Isaac Thornycroft.<sup>9</sup> The skimmers possessed revolutionary hydroplane hulls which enabled most of the craft to leave the water and to almost literally fly above the waves. They could achieve speeds of up to forty-five knots, fast even by today's standards but astonishing for 1919.<sup>10</sup> Gus's boat was forty feet in length and carried a crew of three: captain, gunner and engineer. It was armed with twin Lewis machine guns and a single torpedo which weighed three-quarters of a ton and contained a charge capable of sinking a battleship. Some later CMBs were fifty-five feet long and could carry two torpedoes. However, the CMBs also had an Achilles heel: they were constructed with a skin of thin plywood in order to make them as light as possible and there was little room in their tiny hulls for anything other than weapons, ammunition, the massive engines and their fuel tanks. One shot, even landing close to a CMB, could blow the entire boat to smithereens. Sheer breathtaking speed was a skimmer's only defence.

Following their successful development and deployment, a flotilla of CMBs had been formed by the Royal Navy for special duties in 1918. They had been intended for a secret mission in the Baltic aimed at the destruction of the German High Seas Fleet. The unit had the pick of all the best young officers in the Royal Navy. Each of them was desperate for command of one of these craft with the speed and freedom of a fighter plane, plus the punch to put a capital ship out of commission. Only the best had been selected for the intensive training that the mission required. They spent their time roaring up and down the English Channel, sinking small enemy craft and generally making things unpleasant for the Germans.<sup>11</sup> They had already achieved their first major combat honour when they helped in the operation to sink blockships in the approaches to Zeebrugge harbour on St George's Day, 1918.<sup>12</sup>

But before their plan to attack the German High Seas Fleet could be put into effect, the war had come to an end. The unit now kicked its heels on a dreary base on Osea Island in Essex at the mouth of the river Blackwater. Some CMBs had been sent abroad on other duties but for the rest of the flotilla there was nothing to do except watch the rain pelt steadily onto the mudflats that ringed the island and dream about the Wrens who were billeted in the neighbouring facility.<sup>13</sup> Occasionally, a few officers were granted leave in London, a chance to see a West End show and sink a few drinks, but that was as exciting as it got.

Gus Agar felt particularly hard done by. In 1913 he had qualified as a fighter pilot for the Royal Naval Air Service, but there had been a shortage of aircraft so he had been forced to give that up. In 1916 he had missed the Battle of Jutland, the only major naval battle of the Great War, because the battleship on which he was serving was too slow to join the British fleet in time. Finally, he had been