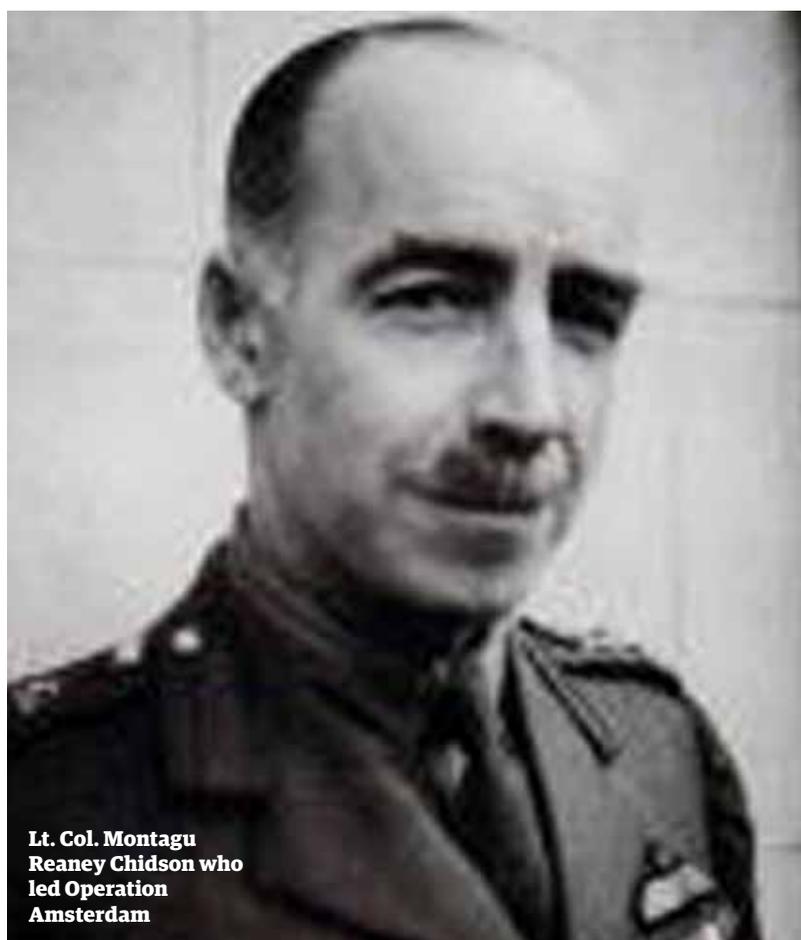


LOOKING BACK



Lt. Col. Montagu Reaney Chidson who led Operation Amsterdam

The warship sent on a secret mission to collect diamonds from Holland

The story of a remarkable operation that took place at the beginning of the Second World War is being pieced together.

It involves HMS Walpole, the destroyer adopted by Ely after the community invested £559,000 of their own savings during “Warship Week” campaigns in 1940 and 1942. In today’s money, that’s close to £31.5 million.

But as she was introduced to the people of Ely, HMS Walpole assisted three men who had to get to Amsterdam as the Nazi’s were invading Holland.

A hub for diamond trading, their mission was to bring back industrial diamonds which could’ve been used to manufacture weapons and war machinery, “If the Nazis managed to get

LOUISE HEPBURN

Louise.Hepburn@archant.co.uk

hold of those diamonds it would’ve considerably strengthened their position in the war,” says Darron Wadey, who is piecing together the mission.

Darron is British and lives in the Netherlands, close to Amsterdam. He is a military history enthusiast researching ‘Operation Amsterdam’. And with no official records available about the mission, it’s certainly a challenge.

Hitler invaded Holland on Friday, May 10 1940. Winston Churchill was running the country as Prime Minister the next day, and HMS Walpole had to

reach the Dutch coast at IJmuiden on the Sunday evening to transfer the men.

Darron said: “The sea lanes were very busy and HMS Walpole would’ve been travelling against the flow. Everyone was fleeing the country, including the Dutch royal family, diplomats and refugees.

“On the way over, it’s understood she had a near miss with the ship carrying the Crown Princess and her family - but we haven’t been able to confirm this in official sources.”

He added: “It certainly would’ve been chaotic in IJmuiden.

“There was no air cover and the Dutch were trying to coordinate their defence and the evacuation of people and property.

“The Dutch air force had been wiped out on the opening day of the invasion and there was the ever present menace of the German Luftwaffe in the skies.

“On the Monday morning, a passenger liner carrying 150 people fleeing also hit a mine and sunk - it was an incredibly dangerous place to be.”

Even so, the three men - Jan Smit, Willem Woltman and Lt Col. Montagu Reaney Chidson - disembarked to carry out a mission they had less than a day to complete.

Smit and Woltman were Dutch employees of JK Smit & Zonen of Amsterdam - one of the largest diamond traders - and were based in Britain. Smit’s father Johan ran the enterprise from Holland.

Lt Col. Chidson was previously with Section D of MI6 and had connections from serving in the First World War. He had also been a diplomat at The Hague.

His obituary in The Times describes the mission by saying: “... at every turn was attended by great hazards.”

It said: “A British destroyer was placed at Chidson’s disposal and got him and his companions as near to the Netherlands as was then practicable. Thence they travelled by a car provided by the Dutch government.

“Once in Amsterdam, he was able to find that his years of service in Holland had by no means been wasted.”

The trio returned to HMS Walpole “bringing with them what they sought” - and three bottles of Napoleon brandy.

Stories passed between crew members suggest the Dutch Crown Jewels were also among the diamonds - but no official sources confirm this.

The obituary continues: “It was with some difficulty that a tug master was persuaded to venture out into the mine-infested waters and with greater difficulty

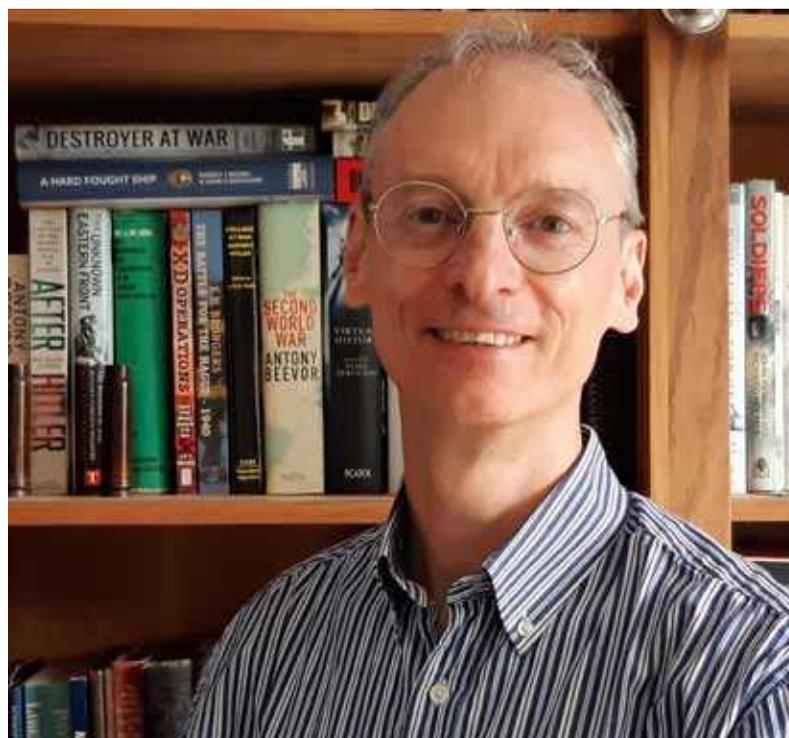


Above, Behind the scenes of Operation Amsterdam being filmed.

Pictures: NOORD-HOLLANDS ARCHIEF/ GEMEENTE VELSEN, KNA001005559

Right, An oil painting of HMS Walpole at Ely Museum

Pictures: ELY MUSEUM/ CONTRIBUTED



Darron Wadey, a military history enthusiast who is researching the real Operation Amsterdam from the Netherlands. Below, Holland was invaded by the Nazis in May 1940. HMS Walpole, a warship adopted by the City of Ely was involved in a mission to remove industrial diamonds from Holland at the start of the Second World War

Pictures: CONTRIBUTED / STADSARCHIEF AMSTERDAM





Germans entering Amsterdam at the start of the Second World War. HMS Walpole, a warship adopted by the City of Ely, was assigned on a special mission to locate and retrieve industrial diamonds from Holland. Inset, Jan Smit, a Dutch diamond trader involved in the real Operation Amsterdam

Pictures: CONTRIBUTED / STADSARCHIEF AMSTERDAM, VEREENIGDE DIAMOND TOOLS FOTOBUEAUX N.V., JK SMIT DIAMOND TOOLS



Diamond dealers at work. Operation Amsterdam's mission was to locate and retrieve industrial diamonds from the Dutch capital. Below, Seventeen crew members from HMS Walpole visited Ely in 1989 Pictures: ELY STANDARD / STADSARCHIEF AMSTERDAM



HMS Walpole

HMS Walpole was a Royal Navy destroyer of the "V" and "W" class. She was built towards the end of the First World War and commissioned in 1918.

In the Second World War, she was mainly involved in convoy escort duties but was assigned to 'Operation Amsterdam' in 1940, the Dieppe Raid in 1942 and also the D-Day Landings.

While patrolling the Scheldt Estuary off the Netherlands coast in January 1945, she hit a mine and was declared a constructive total loss.

Warship Weeks

HMS Walpole was adopted by the city of Ely after residents invested £259,000 of their own savings into the ship following a "Warship Weeks" campaign.

Previously, in 1940, £300,000 had been raised during a similar initiative "War Weapons Week" - and the incredible total meant Ely was able to formally adopt the ship.

"Warship Weeks" and similar campaigns were introduced to encourage communities to save enough money to build and maintain naval

Ely took its adoption with HMS Walpole very seriously with the exchange of commemorative plaques, official visits were documented in the Ely Standard and her ensign is displayed in Ely Cathedral.

The warship painting by L.R. Fraser was presented to Ely Museum by Rear Admiral George C. Crowley CBE DSO, her Commanding Officer between 1943-45.

For many years after the war, crew members visited Ely and marched through the city at events.

ships.

Cities would aim for battleships and aircraft carriers while towns and villages would focus on cruisers and destroyers.

Bill Forster has documented HMS Walpole's background for The V & W Destroyer Association.

An article of his on its website says: "Links were maintained by the writing of letters and the provision of comforts and whenever possible visits were arranged to the adopting areas."

persuaded to wait for the destroyer, which was late for the rendezvous.

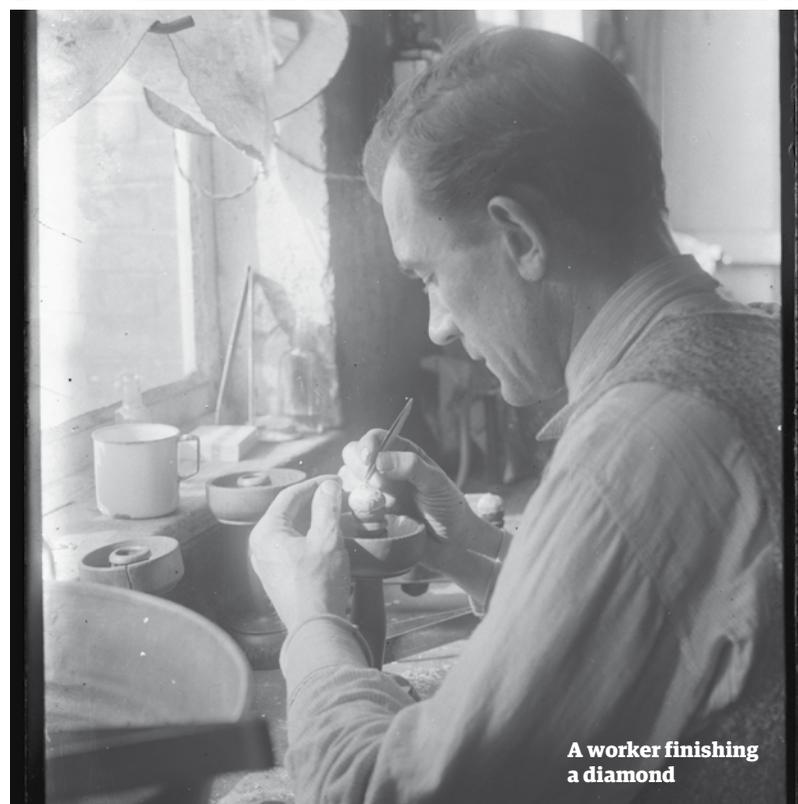
"After a delay that must've been as much of an ordeal as all that had gone on before, the vessel arrived and Chidson climbed the Jacob's ladder up the side, bearing a sack upon his back rather more than £1,250,000 of diamonds."

The mission was dramatised in a book 'Adventure in Diamonds' by David Walker, and further exaggerated in the film 'Operation Amsterdam' starring Peter Finch and Tony Britton.

While Darron is researching the real story from the Netherlands, he has come across several blocks.

Recently, for example, he made contact with JK Smit Diamond Tools and discovered their historic documents were destroyed when their predecessor company went bankrupt.

"It's in keeping with this story that documentation is hard to come by," Darron said.



A worker finishing a diamond