

A Royal Navy Monitor at Stavros.

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My grandfather, Charlie Burgoyne, was a stoker on the monitor, HMS M18. When I asked him the classic “what did you do in the war Grandad?” he told me that he had been at Gallipoli, and that it was horrible, so I never pursued the matter. After he died, I was given his naval service record, and I have recently discovered that he was based around Salonika and Stavros for almost three years after Gallipoli. I have been consulting the Ship’s Log at the National Archives to find out what his vessel was doing, and I also contacted Alan Wakefield at the Society. He suggested I prepared this note since there is very little written about the naval aspects of the Salonika campaign.

Charlie was one of 6 children of George Burgoyne and his wife Lavinia; they lived in the South Devon village of Aveton Gifford. Two of the children had died in infancy, an elder brother was serving with the 2nd Devons, and the two sisters were “in service”. Charlie joined the Navy in January 1909, claiming to be 18 although we suspect he was still only 17.

He served as a stoker but on the outbreak of hostilities he was posted to the oil-fired torpedo boat HMS TB5. She had originally been classed as a Torpedo Boat Destroyer but with the development of the larger Destroyer classes, which could sail with the fleet, they were downgraded to roles as Coastal Destroyers. Charlie spent about 6 months based at Immingham, patrolling each day off the mouth of the Humber, but saw no action.

After 6 months back at Devonport, he was sent to the shipyard of Grays at Hartlepool as part of the first crew of M18. When the Gallipoli campaign was contemplated it was clear that the navy needed vessels for shore bombardment, and they weren’t going to risk battleships in that role. So gun barrels and gun mounts that had been kept as spares to repair battle damage were mounted on slow, stable hulls to produce a new class of vessel, the monitor. The vessels that received the large calibre guns were named, but the smaller guns that had been destined for cruisers were mounted in vessels that just carried a number. So Charlie was to have the distinction of serving throughout WWI on ships with no name.

These smaller monitors were built on merchant ship hulls by commercial shipbuilders. The first four (M15 - M18) received the spare 9.2 guns on the Mark X mount that had been kept for the Cressy class cruisers, which by this stage were themselves obsolete. Later vessels had older 9.2 guns on Mark IX mounts, or smaller 6 guns that had the advantage of a much higher rate of fire. The gun on M18 packed quite a punch; the barrel was 46.7 calibre, and the revolving weight of gun and mounting was some 70 tonnes. The typical high explosive projectile weighed 380 lbs and had a range of about 25,000 yards (14 miles). The average spread [dispersion] was 200 - 250 yards at a range of 7000 - 8000 yards (180 - 230 m spread at ranges of 6,400 - 7,300 m). In common with most naval guns, however, the barrels could not elevate very far, which meant that the shells followed a flat trajectory, bursting over fortifications, rather than having the plunging trajectory from howitzers that could fall

into dugouts. M18's log shows that, at least initially, the gun was fired once every 5 minutes or so, but this interval improved to about 2 minutes with practice.

M18 sailed round to Devonport, where she was fitted out and readied for despatch, but suffered a fire while undergoing basin trials, which required the magazines to be flooded. It must have been fairly serious because she was drydocked and delayed by a month. She sailed on 8th Sept 1915, via Gibraltar and Malta, arriving at Mudros, the British naval base on the island of Lemnos, on 23rd October. This was too late to cover the Gallipoli landings, or those at Suvla Bay, but she did provide gunfire support from off the beaches themselves or from the monitor bases behind Mavro Island (also known as Rabbit Island). She was involved in providing covering fire for the evacuations from Suvla, Anzac and Hellas beaches.



The only photo of Charlie (on the left) that I know was taken during the war. His cap badge says HMS M18, while his mate was serving on HMS Peony. I suspect the photo was taken at Salonika or Mudros.

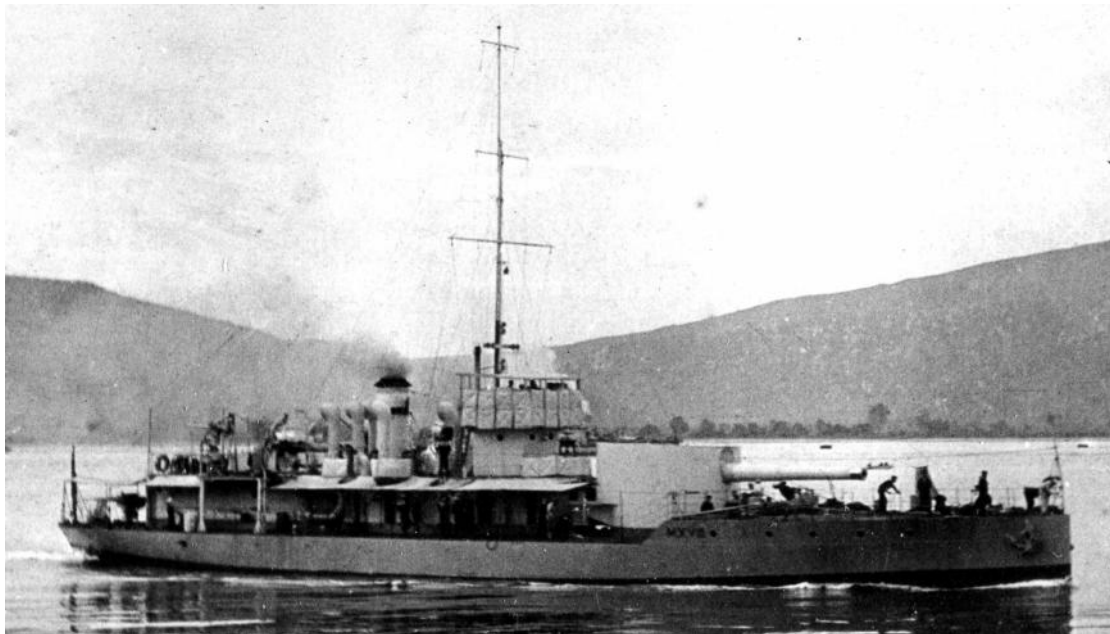
On 20th Nov 1915 she was sent to Milo, in the southern Aegean. A large Anglo-French fleet was being assembled to put pressure on the Greek King. He was married to a sister of the Kaiser, so was sympathetic to the Central Powers, while Venizelos, the Prime Minister, was sympathetic to the Allies. The voyage caused trouble; M18 was caught in a northerly gale and the starboard engine broke down. The ship broached, getting caught sideways on to the sea, and took on a lot of water. The crew's mess deck was flooded to a depth of four feet and the crew lost most of their personal effects. M18 had to be towed to a safe anchorage where the engine was repaired. She eventually made it to Milo, but an accommodation was made with the King and the fleet dispersed.

The monitors were renowned for rolling. The hulls were stiffened to cope with the recoil from the gun, but they had no bilge keels and as a consequence rolled alarmingly on firing and when at sea. Admiral Sir Reginald Bacon in his book "Concise Story of the Dover Patrol" wrote "The 9.2 monitors were queer craft. They steamed about 9 knots, drew only 6 feet of water and handled well, but they rolled! M25, in the mouth of the Thames at anchor rolled 180 degrees in ten seconds. So great was the velocity of the roll that the 3 pdr cartridge cases were thrown almost vertically out of their boxes into the air". The monitors were not designed to engage

ships but the Admiral goes on to describe an engagement when M26, M27 (both with two 6-inch guns) and two Torpedo Boat Destroyers (with 12-pdr guns) saw off three German destroyers, each armed with three 4-inch guns. He surmises that if the Germans had closed the range quickly the more rapid fire of their guns could have sunk all four British vessels, but they were put off by the longer range of the monitors' 6-inch weapons.

On 13th Jan 1916, M18 was sent to Salonika for the first time; she spent a few days guarding the boom there before being sent round the Halkidiki peninsula to Stavros. She sailed along the Bulgarian coast, presumably looking for targets of opportunity or gathering intelligence, mooring off Thasos (which was held by the Greeks) before returning to Stavros, Salonika and Mudros on 13th Mar 1916.

This sort of pattern seems to have repeated itself for much of the remainder of the war. Initially she had to return to Salonika or Mudros for supplies, but later Stavros itself seems to have been protected by nets, and a pier built, so she could refuel and rearm locally.



M18 at Stavros. The hull was clearly built around the gun she was to carry. (IWM)

M18 seems to have been mainly employed at Stavros, from which it was only a few miles along the coast to the front line at Chai Aghizi, at the mouth of the Struma; she regularly moored there to fire on enemy batteries, trenches or working parties. There must have been other monitors involved, because there seems to have developed a 2 days on, 2 days off, pattern. The island of Thasos was also in her patrol area, and she seems to have visited it regularly. Less frequent visits were made to Samothrace. The monitors also carried out various ferrying roles, supplying Tuzla Fort on the tip of the Karaburan peninsula south of Salonika, which seems to have needed to be supplied by sea. She also dropped off men for various activities behind enemy lines, and searched for downed aircraft and their crews.

In May 1916 M18 was sent to cover the evacuation of Long Island in the approaches to Smyrna. The port was being blockaded from the island, but on 13th May M30 (a

6 monitor) had been sunk by gunfire from a new, heavier-calibre weapon brought up by the Turks. This meant that the occupation of Long Island could not be sustained and on 27th May it was evacuated. This patrol by M18 with her 9.2 gun, and Grafton, with even larger guns, presumably was to provide covering fire for that evacuation. The small monitors often worked with the larger monitors; they could provide covering fire and by triangulation could pinpoint the fall of shot which is always difficult from a single vessel.

Mudros was clearly where the major depot ships were based; a large safe anchorage with most of the facilities the fleet needed, including floating docks and heavy lifting gear. M18 was docked there on several occasions to have her bottom scraped, and she also had her 9.2 gun replaced. But she made one trip to Malta, where she spent a month undergoing a major refit which, as far as I can see, was the only period in nearly three years when the crew spent any significant time ashore, although even then they lived aboard and did quite a lot of the refitting work themselves. It is not clear from the log what was done at Malta; bilge keels may have been fitted to try to prevent the rolling to which these ships were prone.

M18 came under fire from enemy batteries on a few occasions, and enemy planes dropped bombs near her, but she does not seem to have suffered any casualties apart from one gunner who was killed by a premature explosion while in the ship's boat. The crew were out of range of the Bulgarian guns, and more importantly they were also away from the malarial swamps that caused so many casualties amongst soldiers. But in addition to the loss of M30 off Smyrna, M28 was sunk when the Goeben and Breslau attempted to break out of the Dardanelles, and M15 was torpedoed off Palestine, so the risks were real.

The monitors were not involved in the Battle for Doiran, or any of the fighting at the end of the war; presumably it was too far away from the coast for their guns to be of any use. M18 was at Mudros when Bulgaria surrendered on 29th September 1918, and he was presumably amongst the 27 ratings who were discharged that day.

The war wasn't quite over for M18. She was part of the British fleet that steamed triumphantly through the Dardanelles to anchor off Constantinople on 13th November and then went on support the White Russian forces against the Bolsheviks. She sailed into the Black Sea and took part in shore bombardment near Sebastopol on the Crimea and in the Sea of Azov off Akhmanai. Several of the other monitors went north and were sent into the river Dvina at Archangel. Two of them were unable to get out because of low water levels and were scuttled to avoid falling into Bolshevik hands.

M18 was withdrawn to Yalta, and in August 1919 she went to Malta to pay off. Later in 1919 most of the small monitors were put up for sale and many were bought by the Anglo-Saxon Petroleum Company (now Shell); M18 was converted in Holland and renamed Anam. Their shallow draft made them ideal for shuttling oil between wells and refineries in Lake Maracaibo. In 1924 she moved to Hamburg and was scrapped in 1935 (see postscript below). A few of the monitors remained in naval service, most being converted to minelayers, and some survived to serve in WWII and one, M33, is in Portsmouth to this day.

What of Charlie? By the end of January 1919 he was back in Devonport, now serving on the big gun monitor, HMS Marshal Soult, sometimes described as “the ugliest ship in the Royal Navy”, which was used as a gunnery training ship because she was equipped with modern weapons; she was based at Devonport and rarely moved so he got home regularly. But the family he came back to was very different from the one he left. His brother had been killed in the dreadful slaughter on the opening day of the Battle of the Somme when British losses amounted to over 57,000 men; on the same day M18 entered dry dock in Malta. His sister, father and fiancée all died in the influenza epidemic at the end of the war, probably before he was able to see them again. His mother was left to bring up three grandchildren by herself. Charlie went on to serve in “The mighty Hood” (HMS Hood) as well as several destroyers, ending as a Petty Officer; he left the service at the height of the depression and worked as a labourer in Paignton. He was recalled in 1938 and worked at the Britannia Naval College in Dartmouth. He died in 1967.

There is relatively little written about naval events in the Aegean during WWI, apart from Gallipoli itself. Perhaps the best is an article by an unnamed Petty Officer who served on a trawler; “The work of a trawler in the Aegean Sea” was published in the Naval Review in 1918 and is available on-line at www.naval-review.org. The author has very critical things to say about senior officers in their wardrooms back in Mudros and gives a vivid picture of the day-to-day issues facing the men in the little ships. A more conventional history is provided in “Naval War in the Mediterranean 1914-1918” by Paul G. Halpern, while “Big Gun Monitors” by Ian Buxton gives details of the ships themselves, with a chapter devoted to the smaller monitors like M18. Readers may also be interested in a series of large scale Austro-Hungarian maps that are available at <http://lazarus.elte.hu/hun/digkonyv/topo/3felmeres.htm>. They are very detailed and give many of the place names that are no longer to be found on modern maps.

If anyone has any other family stories about the work of the naval monitors in the Aegean, especially M18, I would be very pleased to hear from them. I can be contacted at cjb@eng.cam.ac.uk.

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Postscript.

1. M18 was not scrapped in 1935 as written above. She was sold to an Italian company and renamed the Alcione C. In 14 April 1943 the Alcione C was sailing south past the east coast of Corsica, on a voyage from La Maddalena to Bastia, carrying materials for the Italian army, when she was spotted by the British submarine HMS Taurus. The submarine sank her by gunfire at a range of 3000 yards and she lies at a depth of 34m at 42.305417N, 9.576583E. She is apparently upright, in good condition, and is on lists of good dive sites. I have swum over the site, hoping to see her, but was not allowed to dive to the sea bed, so I could see nothing, although I have been given a video of her taken that day by one of the divers.

2. As a result of this article I was contacted by someone whose great uncle Thomas Gooderson was a steward on M18 with Charlie. The family have always been confused by the fact that he is buried in a CWGC cemetery in the centre of France (at Paray-le-Monial), having died of influenza on 23 Oct 1918. It seems likely that he was discharged from the ship at the end of September, with Charlie, and then went by ship to Marseilles for transport up through France by train. He must have been taken ill on that journey and died miles away from the sea.