

Flame Across Britain - Part One, by Simon Wilson

Operation Lucid

"Flame all across Britain, ringing the coasts, spurting from the hedges and rolling down the hills. We will burn the invader back into the sea."

That's not Churchill, for once, but Geoffrey Lloyd MP, one of the lesser-known politicians of WW2.



This all started when my wife found a medallion (*above*), as we emptied some old boxes. It's very small, just 21mm in diameter, and it is cheaply made from gilded brass. The obverse bears conjoined busts with the words "GEORGE V" and "MARY". The reverse has the Royal arms within a blue enamel circle containing the words "JUBILEE MEDAL PRESENTED BY GEOFFREY LLOYD MP"



Several MPs gave medallions to school children to commemorate the Jubilee of George V and Queen Mary in 1935. A local example was given by W L Everard, MP for Melton Mowbray (and part of the Leicester brewing family). Lloyd (*left*), was MP for several places in his career, being MP for Birmingham Ladywood at the time of the Jubilee.

It's only a small medallion, as the pictures show, but it's a good example of how much history can come to light as you search for information.

Lloyd entered Parliament in 1931. By 1939 he was Secretary for Mines, a department which included petroleum. He had several job titles during the war but they reflected changes in organisation rather than actual changes of job. He was mainly concerned with fuel and was Chairman of the Oil Control Board 1939-45 and parliamentary secretary to the Ministry of Fuel and Power from 1942 until 1945. This

involved the supply, rationing and regulation of fuel. However, his most interesting job was as Minister in Charge of the Petroleum Warfare Department (PWD) from its foundation in 1940 until the end of the war, a job which, in contrast to his others, involved setting fire to huge amounts of fuel.

The department was initially tasked with developing flame-based weapons to defend against German invasion after the Fall of France. Several events during the Dunkirk withdrawal had alerted the military to the potential of petroleum as a weapon and at a time when we were short of conventional weapons, we had plenty of petrol. Supplies from the Middle East had ceased, but the USA was very happy to sell us oil and supplies that had been meant for Europe. Petrol was rationed and private motoring was discouraged, not because fuel was in short supply, but to allow us to limit the supply of fuel to an invading army, by closing petrol stations and taking private cars off the roads.

Even before the department was formed, Lloyd had been working on the control of oil supplies to deny them to the enemy and had been looking at ways of destroying our oil reserves in the case of invasion. It took little effort to persuade him that oil could also be a useful defensive weapon. Based on reports from the Dunkirk evacuation he developed a vision - "Flame all across Britain, ringing the coasts, spurting from the hedges and rolling down the hills. We will burn the invader back into the sea."

Operation Lucid was the result of several unconvincing attempts "to set the sea on fire". The tanker *Suffolk* had been blown up at sea, but had failed to impress. Similarly, the plan to fill a coir mat with oil and set it alight, whilst producing an 800-yard ribbon of flame which could be towed by a fishing vessel did not appear particularly useful in fighting off an invasion. The plan in *Operation Lucid*, was to take the fire to the enemy, to launch fireships against German invasion barges as they lay in harbour, and to stop the invasion before it started. It appealed to Churchill and his sense of history, and mirrored Drake's attack on the Armada, singeing the king of Spain's beard. Churchill used the phrase "singe Mr Hitler's moustache", though it did not become one of his better-known quotes.



Under the command of Captain Augustus Agar VC, DSO, the plan slowly limped into action. It needed three spare oil tankers, which we didn't have, so Agar had to be content with three RFA oilers built in 1918 and 1919. *War Nawab* (left), had been withdrawn from service in May 1939 and *War Nizam* in September – they were both laid up with skeleton crews. *Oakfield*, (formerly *War African*) was laid up due to unreliable machinery.

They were brought back into vaguely usable condition by unenthusiastic dock workers who could not be told of the importance of the project because of the secrecy surrounding it. They were loaded with several thousand tons of oil mixture (*Agar's Special Mixture*, developed by the PWD - 50 % heavy fuel oil, 25 % diesel and 25 %) and a variety of explosives, including "old depth charges". Unlike fine wine, high explosives do not improve with age and the cargo, according to one of the unlucky crew, was, "not very sleep inspiring".

The bulkheads of the *War Nawab* were leaky and allowed fumes to enter the engine room, causing crewmen to pass out and leading the harbourmaster to accuse them of drunkenness.

The plan was to sail to Boulogne where the crews would be taken off by speedboats and the tankers would be detonated. Burning oil mix would spread across the sea and be drawn into the harbour by the tide, causing panic and setting fire to the invasion fleet. It sounds spectacular, but there was a problem. Well, several to be honest.



On the first attempt two of the fireships broke down. The second and third attempts were thwarted by weather conditions and the fourth was aborted when Agar's destroyer, *HMS Hambledon* (left), was damaged by a mine and had to be towed back to port. The postponement of the invasion led to the suspension of further attempts and although the project was revived in Spring 1941 it was never put into action. In justice to Agar, who was an exceptional officer in many ways, this plan and its outcome was not a fair reflection

of his abilities.

The grandiose plans to set the seas on fire never did come to much. The original test, on a calm sea in summer temperatures, was so successful it boiled the water and scorched the observers but they were never able to repeat it as choppy seas and cold, weather all caused problems. The nearest it came to reality was in a plan to spray burning oil on the sea. This took the form of short-range oil sprayers installed on the coast to spray burning oil and inconvenience German troops as they came ashore. Eventually approval was given for 50 miles of sprayers to be installed but in the end only about 10 miles were actually built, due to a combination of factors, including lack of enthusiasm from commanders, a shortage of steel and a diminishing threat of invasion.

The greatest success of these flame weapons seems to have been in propaganda, where the British seem to have convinced both the Germans and the USA that they had been used, were effective and had caused many German casualties. These included reports of thousands of burn victims being treated in Germany and abortive invasion attempts being beaten back on British beaches.