

# ADMIRAL OF THE FLEET EARL MOUNTBATTEN OF BURMA

**INNOVATOR, STATESMAN  
AND HERO ON TWO FRONTS**

Lord Mountbatten's force of personality and ability to galvanise had a marked impact on the war against the Nazis, and, the war had a marked impact on him, as **Joshua M Casper** explores.

## BIOGRAPHY

**Nickname(s):** Dickie  
**Born:** June 25, 1900, Windsor  
**Died:** August 27, 1979 (aged 79), Mullaghmore, Ireland  
**Allegiance:** United Kingdom/British Empire  
**Service/branch:** Royal Navy/Chief of Combined Operations, Supreme Allied Command South East Asia, First Sea Lord, Chief of the Defence Staff  
**Battles/wars:** *First World War:* North Sea, interment of the High Seas Fleet, *Second World War:* Namsos, the Lizard, Crete, [As planner: Operation Biting, Operation Chariot, Operation Jubilee, Operation Overlord], Recapture of Burma, *Post-war:* Operation Tiderace  
**Awards:** KG, GCB, KCB, CB, OM, GCSI, GCIE, GCVO, KCVO, MVO, DSO, KStJ, CStJ, Order of Isabella (Spain), Order of the Nile (Egypt), Order of the Crown (Romania), Order of the Star (Romania), War Cross (Greece), Legion of Merit (USA), Order of the Cloud and Banner (Republic of China), DSM (USA), Grand Cross of the Légion d'honneur (France), Order of the Star (Nepal), Order of the White Elephant (Thailand), Order of George I (Greece), Order of the Netherlands Lion (Netherlands), Order of Aviz (Portuguese Republic), Royal Order of Seraphim (Sweden), Order of Thiri Thuamma (Burma), Order of the Seal of Solomon (Ethiopia)

**OPPOSITE** Official photograph showing Chief of Combined Operations, Lord Louis Mountbatten at his desk, 1943.

(ALL IMAGES VIA AUTHOR UNLESS NOTED OTHERWISE)

**E**arl Mountbatten of Burma was one of the most influential Britons of the 20th century. The naval hero was an integral part of the Allied victory, propelling him into the centre of power and shaping his world view. When war broke out in 1939 he began a meteoric rise that saw him climb to First Sea Lord, Admiral of the Fleet, and to senior NATO command before becoming Chief of the Defence Staff – the professional head of the British military – helping to form the Ministry of Defence. He shaped the monarchy too, when, while at Dartmouth Royal Naval College, he was instrumental in the courtship of a young Princess Elizabeth and Prince Philip. Such was Mountbatten's role within the family, the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge named their third child for him, and Prince Charles calls him his “honorary grandfather”.

Born Prince Louis of Battenberg in 1900 the predictably precocious young Prince Louis Albert Francis Victor Nicholas or ‘Dickie’ (so as not to be confused with his Uncle Nicky, Czar of Russia) knocked off his Great-Grandmother Queen Victoria’s spectacles while in her arms during his christening. Lord Mountbatten followed in his father’s footsteps and entered the Royal Naval College in 1913. He received his first posting as a midshipman in 1916, under the command of Admiral David Beatty, who would eventually become Admiral of the Fleet. After the war he became a naval attaché and aide-de-camp to the Prince of Wales during both of his high-profile world tours. The future Edward VIII and Duke of Windsor was Mountbatten’s best man when he married Edwina Ashley, one of Britain’s most eligible socialites and granddaughter of banker Ernest Cassel. Though he didn’t need to work, Mountbatten was determined to succeed in the navy. After a spell at



Christ College Cambridge and naval signal communications school – an area in which he excelled – he cut his teeth in the Mediterranean. His first foray was in Malta when in 1934 he was given command of his first ship, the aptly named HMS *Daring*.

By 1942 the Nazis began constructing their Atlantikwall, having occupied much of Europe, while Japan had conquered the Pacific and wrought havoc in China and Southeast Asia. Meanwhile, in Britain, a newfangled department called Combined Operations, led by a loquacious iconoclast with Royal connections was charged with bucking convention to turn the tide of war. A sardonic staff officer had some poetic thoughts on his intrepid leader:

*Mountbatten was a likely lad,  
A nimble brain Mountbatten had,  
And this most amiable trait:  
Of each new plan which came his way  
He'd always claim in accents pat  
'Why, I myself invented that!  
Adding when he remembered it,  
For any scoffer's benefit,  
Roughly the point in his career  
When he'd conceived the bright idea,  
As 'August 1934'*

Or 'Some time during the Boer War'. Lord Louis Mountbatten's wartime triumphs and tribulations began on a small destroyer named HMS *Kelly* and

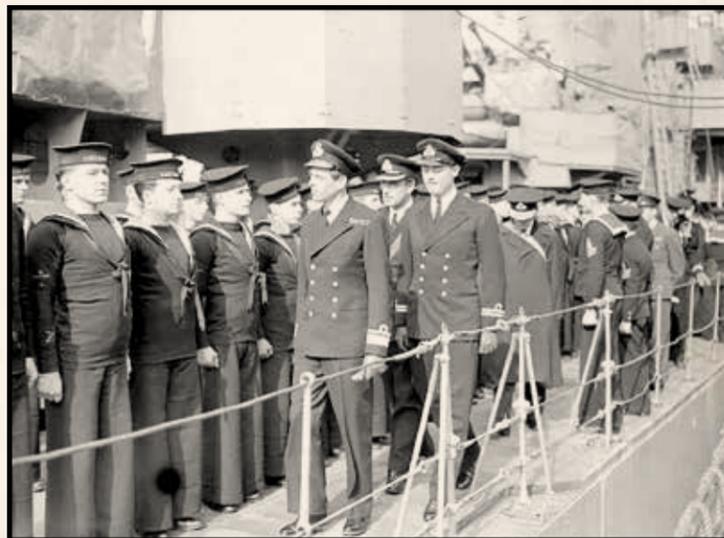
ended with a Samurai sword resting in the hands of King George VI. In between, he would have his ship sunk, make it to the big screen, help plan the largest invasion in world history, be at President Roosevelt and Prime Minister Churchill's side in Quebec and with successors Attlee and Truman in Teheran, and help free millions.

To say the least, the man who would become Earl Mountbatten of Burma and the last Viceroy of India was indispensable on two

fronts and essential to allied victory. "I have a congenital weakness for feeling certain I can do anything," Mountbatten once confessed to Winston Churchill.

**A HAPPY SHIP, SIR**

Mountbatten's war started with an event that was famously retold with an Academy Award performance, and he wouldn't have had it any other way. Noël Coward's *In Which We Serve* dramatises the life and eventual



**RIGHT**  
Mountbatten on board the destroyer HMS *Kelly*.

**BELOW**  
'HMS *Kelly*, 1939' by Montague Dawson.

**"LORD LOUIS MOUNTBATTEN'S WARTIME TRIUMPHS AND TRIBULATIONS BEGAN ON A SMALL DESTROYER NAMED HMS KELLY AND ENDED WITH A SAMURAI SWORD RESTING IN THE HANDS OF KING GEORGE VI."**



demise of Mountbatten's HMS *Kelly*: "What sort of ship do I want the *Torrin* to be?" asks Captain Kinross, played by Coward, using a pseudonym but the very words of his close friend Mountbatten. Having heeded his credo, the crew exclaims: "A happy ship, sir! An efficient ship sir!"

Kinross orates: "...Some of you might think I am ambitious wanting both but, in my experience, you can't have one without the other. She can't be happy unless she is efficient, and she certainly won't be efficient unless she is happy." Mountbatten – or Kinross – then tells his crew Von Ribbentrop has signed a non-aggression pact with Hitler and war is imminent. Instead of the standard three weeks to get the *Torrin* (or *Kelly*) ready to sail, the crew must do so in three days: "None of us will take our clothes off, or turn in, or swing our hands for the next three days and nights until the job is finished. Then we'll send Hitler a telegram. The *Torrin* is ready you can start your war!"

Mountbatten later recalled that everyone picked up a paintbrush and the crew had the ship ready in three days. They painted the *Kelly* 'Mountbatten pink' – a colour he devised – to better camouflage ships. Mountbatten was prepping

the *Kelly* when, with paintbrush in hand, he had received the famous cable "Winston is back!" Churchill had returned as First Lord of the Admiralty, the same position he had held during the Great War. He was back in the saddle as head of the navy as Britain was on the brink of war, soon he would head the war cabinet and be Prime Minister in a coalition government with Labour lead Clem Attlee as his deputy.

Churchill and the Mountbatten family had strong ties. It was during the Great War that Mountbatten's father, Prince Louis of Battenberg was forced to resign due to the anti-German sentiment that swept Britain, much to the chagrin of Churchill. It was a seminal moment in the life of Lord Mountbatten, also known then as Prince Louis of Battenberg. The Battenbergs were forced to relinquish their German Royal titles and anglicise their name as had King George VI, from Saxe-Coburg-Gotha to Windsor. His father's ousting drove him.

**THE KELLY**

Like his silver screen namesake Captain Kinross, Mountbatten always sensed war. Alongside confidants Churchill and Anthony Eden, he abhorred appeasement, pursued by



**ABOVE**  
Lord Mountbatten in 1973, taken in Belgravia, London, by Allan Warren. (ALLAN WARREN)

**LEFT**  
Captain Lord Louis Mountbatten on the bridge of HMS *Kelvin*.

the governments of Stanley Baldwin and Neville Chamberlin. Mountbatten had been trying to modernise the navy and prepare for war since the late 1930s. He tried to pressure the Admiralty to adapt a new anti-aircraft gun and ensure communications were properly encrypted. "I happen to know of two instances where Lord Mountbatten turned his restless energy onto things that weren't his concern at the time," recalled Donald McLachlan, author of the book *Room 39*, quoted in John Terraine's *The Life and Times of Lord Mountbatten*. "He became interested in anti-aircraft guns, strictly the domain of the gunnery division. It was he who pressed against almost unbelievable opposition for the Oerlikon gun which was then only accepted at the 11th hour and then became standard equipment throughout the fleet. Now if we had gotten the gun in the nick of time; we were six years late with measures to stop the enemy deciphering warship and merchant ship signals. Had the navy accepted Mountbatten's advice in 1936 and adopted the cipher machine ➤"

RIGHT

Lord Louis Mountbatten before being pushed into the water during the "Crossing the Line" ceremony on HMS Renown. (PA ARCHIVE)



BELOW

Lord Louis Mountbatten with Edward, Prince of Wales, Malta, April 1920. (PA ARCHIVE)



She met her ultimate fate – as did her doppelganger, *Torrin* – during the Battle of Crete. As Philip Ziegler, Mountbatten's official biographer notes, while he was an impetuous captain, he aroused loyalty from his crew. Mountbatten recalled: "It was about this time, I believe, that a certain admiral coined a phrase about me: 'I know of nobody I'd sooner be with in a tight corner than Dickie Mountbatten, and I know of nobody who could get me into one quicker.'"

After a sailor abandoned post when the *Kelly* was attacked, Mountbatten showed leniency and inspired the crew with rhetoric: "You've just been through a harrowing experience... Out of 260 men, 259 behaved as I expected they would. One did not. One left his post. This is a most serious offence in time of war, and you may be surprised

that I propose letting him off with a caution – or rather two cautions: one to him, and one to me, for having failed to impress myself sufficiently in three months on all of you, for you to know that I would never tolerate such behaviour.

"Nobody will ever again leave their post. I will never give the order, 'Abandon Ship'. The only way in which we will ever leave the ship will be if she sinks under our feet."

True to his word, he stayed on the bridge as the *Kelly* disappeared. His ship had gone down, but Mountbatten's mettle brought filmgoers to tears and forged a lifelong bond with his men. Most of the pivotal monologues in *In Which We Serve* were Mountbatten's own words and the tale of HMS *Kelly* served an important role in boosting wartime morale.

### WINSTON WAS CALLING

His beloved ship lost, it was first thought Mountbatten would take over the carrier HMS *Illustrious*, being rebuilt at Norfolk, Virginia. So, he travelled to the States with his wife, Edwina, in the summer of 1941. Edwina, who by then had found her life's work as patron of the St John Ambulance Corps, went on a goodwill tour to thank the American Red Cross, while Mountbatten spoke at what he characterised as a woefully unprepared Pearl Harbor.

It was during that trip he first met President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. He and Mrs Roosevelt even took in a screening of *In Which We Serve* at the White House. A relationship was cemented, Mountbatten later told documentarian John Terraine: "It had

been a great thrill to me to meet Roosevelt at various times during the war, I had admired him ever since he was first elected. I was a strong supporter of his 'New Deal' policy. And the support and help he gave us when we stood alone, before Russia or America came into the war, were things we could never forget.

"We became personal friends in 1942 when I stayed with him at the White House. But as Supreme Allied Commander I stood in a special relationship to him. He had made that quite clear to me at Quebec, when I was appointed. 'General Eisenhower,' he told me, 'is as much a servant of your King as of me. I trust you will feel the same way about me in southeast Asia.' I promised him I would be a good American, and he laughed and thanked me."

Mountbatten's visit to the White House was cut short by a message from 10 Downing Street that would change the entire course of his career. Winston was calling. Mountbatten, as he often did during the war, went to Chequers. There Winston told him he was not to lead HMS *Illustrious*, but move to Combined



**"NOBODY WILL EVER AGAIN LEAVE THEIR POST. I WILL NEVER GIVE THE ORDER, 'ABANDON SHIP'. THE ONLY WAY IN WHICH WE WILL EVER LEAVE THE SHIP WILL BE IF SHE SINKS UNDER OUR FEET"**

RIGHT

Mountbatten (far left) at the 1943 Quebec Conference. L to R: Admiral of the Fleet Sir Dudley Pound, Gen Sir Alan Brooke, ACM Sir Charles Portal, AM L Breadner, Field Marshal Sir John Dill, Lt-Gen Sir Hastings Ismay, Adm E King, Gen H Arnold, Adm W Leahy, Lt-Gen K Stuart, V-Adm P Nelles and Gen G Marshal.

which the RAF were trying out then hundreds of ships would be saved from the U-boats."

Mountbatten's predictions were prescient. Britain was at war, and HMS *Kelly* was part of the fifth destroyer flotilla, where they fought in the North Sea. Though his rhetoric was soaring, his luck as captain was less so. The *Kelly* was damaged three times – hit by a mine, in a collision and finally torpedoed. His daughter Lady Pamela Hicks recalled the crowds cheering as the *Kelly* limped home in tow after being mined. Mountbatten, despite his arguably less than discerning decisions at the helm, was greeted as a hero.

By the time HMS *Kelly* entered the Mediterranean in April 1941, she had spent half the war in drydock.



Operations. A navy man at heart, Mountbatten looked none too pleased and wanted to go back to sea. "Have you no sense of glory?" Churchill, who like Mountbatten lacked not for sense of self, grumbled truculently. Mountbatten could nary refuse.

Though just a Rear-Admiral he took over from his mentor and polo buddy Admiral of the Fleet Roger Keyes. Some with more seniority – especially the Chiefs of Staff – had doubts. Despite Mountbatten's relative youth and lack of seniority, his ability to win friends and influence people had won over the likes of FDR and Eisenhower, who called him intelligent, courteous, and said he would make a good choice, as did Roosevelt.

### SPIRIT OF THE HIVE

While perceived as a newfangled and eccentric operation by some of the more conservative forces at Whitehall, Combined Ops changed the course of the war and modern warfare. They were the extension of the commandos, and the general ideology of combined forces was to get disparate branches of the military working from one strategic page. The concept – while old as war ➤

ABOVE

Combined Operations training with small craft. (US NATIONAL ARCHIVES)

LEFT

Mountbatten addresses the men of No.6 Commando prior to the abortive raid on the Adour Estuary (Operation Myrmidon) in April 1942. The raid was called off partly due to poor weather.

**RIGHT** Survivors of the sinking of HMS Kelly outside the Imperial War Museum with Mountbatten's daughter, Lady Pamela Hicks, in May 1986.

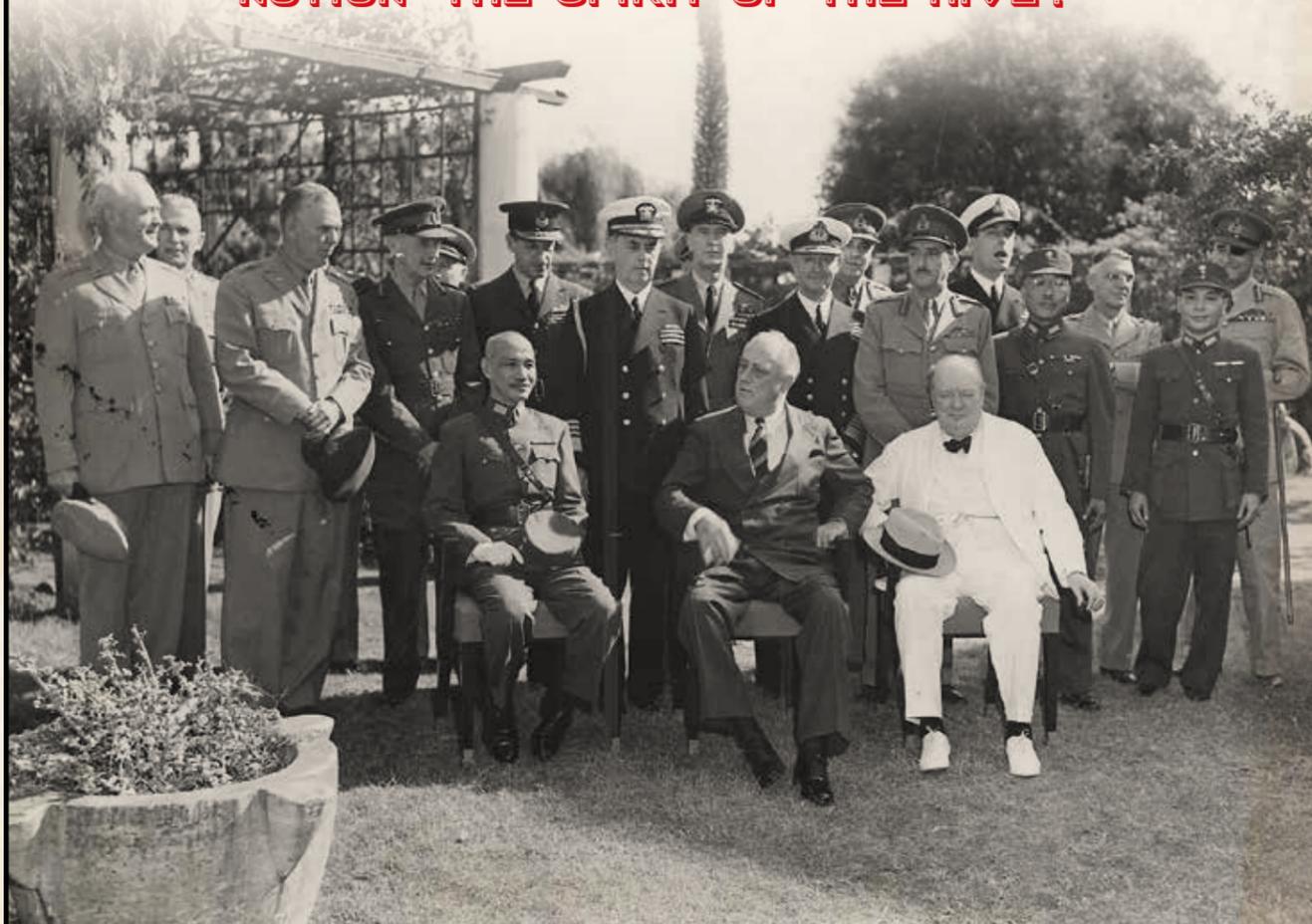
(TOPFOTO)

**BELOW** British, American, and Chinese military and civil leaders at the Cairo Conference, November 1943. Lord Mountbatten is stood in the back row, behind Winston Churchill.

(NARA)



**"WHILE SYMBOLIC, THAT MOUNTBATTEN HELD RANK IN ALL THREE SERVICES WAS FITTING. CO-OPERATION AMONG THE SERVICES BECAME HIS GUIDING MILITARY DOCTRINE. HE CALLED SUCH A NOTION 'THE SPIRIT OF THE HIVE'."**



Success in war was about fostering harmony among men, forces and nations. Individual vanity needed to be subsumed for the good of the whole. Unity was paramount to military success. It is a concept he adhered to throughout his professional life, culminating many years later when he was head of Britain's armed forces. With America and the rest of the allied forces far from prepared for a large-scale invasion, Combined Ops commandos staged a number of harassing raids against small strategic targets.

More importantly they were used as a testing ground for military unity and precision as well as a 'workshop' to develop the means for large-scale beach invasions, eventually culminating with Operations Torch and Overlord. Combined Operations was charged with devising the technical and

organisational means to execute an unprecedented coastal incursion – the largest co-ordinated military invasion in world history. All the landing craft, transport and raids on Normandy fell under their umbrella.

Mountbatten recalled that had Churchill summed up his job in one line: "I want you to turn the south coast of England into a springboard of defence and a bastion of attack." However, his stint wasn't without its foibles. After a series of successful small-scale operations – including the attack on St Nazaire – Mountbatten and the Combined Ops commandos decided to embark upon a larger-scale beach-front raid at Dieppe, using mostly Canadian troops. It was an unmitigated disaster. Thousands dead, injured, or captured. Controversial to this day, Dieppe did show the foibles of a beachfront landing, as Mountbatten spun it.



**TOP INNOVATORS**

That said, his ability to galvanise and innovate was lauded. Like Churchill, Mountbatten was a visionary, and no idea was too far-fetched. Combined Ops became a laboratory of innovation that bucked convention. Mountbatten, who himself invented the Mountbatten Station Keeping Gear (described by the patent as "station keeping apparatus for warships... that of maintaining a ship which is proceeding with others in formation in its correct relative position with respect to the adjacent ships") was always keen on technology. In 1966 he was one of the few outside the realm of the sciences to be inducted into the Royal Society.

Enter the Yale zoologist, the communist molecular biologist and the bohemian inventor – respectively, Solly Zuckerman, J D Bernal and Geoffrey Pyke. They were brought into Combined Ops by its new C-in-C to apply scientific research toward the unprecedented military beach landing that would become D-Day. They brought a pioneering spirit and a tenor of problem-solving. Pyke conceived Project Plough, a snow-going force, complete with vehicles (the M29 Weasel being designed with the force in mind), which eventually evolved into the Canadian-American First Special Service Force. None of his ideas were eschewed. There was Pykrete, named for the eponymous inventor, a reinforced ice blend (using sawdust) designed to be turned into supersized aircraft carriers made of ice. ➤

**ABOVE**

King George VI's visit to Mountbatten's Combined Operations HQ, September 1942.

**LEFT**

Roosevelt and Churchill during the Casablanca Conference of January 1943. Mountbatten stands front row, second right. (NARA)

**LEFT**

Casablanca Conference attendees. Seated, L to R: Adm Ernest King USN, Winston Churchill and Franklin Roosevelt. Maj-Gen Hastings Ismay; Lord Louis Mountbatten, and Field Marshal Sir John Dill stand behind them. (EVERETT COLLECTION/MARY EVANS)



**ABOVE** Mountbatten takes the salute at a passing-out parade of new officers for the Royal Armoured Corps. at Sandhurst. (TOPFOTO)

**RIGHT** Mountbatten (centre) with his staff, April 1942.

L to R: Gp Capt A Willetts, R-Adm H Horan, Maj-Gen J Haydon, AVM J Ross, Brig G Wildman-Lushington, and Cmdre R Ellis. (TOPFOTO)

**RIGHT** Adm Sir Bruce Fraser with Gen 'Joe' Stillwell and Mountbatten, in Ceylon, 22 September 1944.



Bernal busied himself with preparations for the upcoming invasion and studied the gradient of the beaches and mapped them in detail. Another stroke of Combined Ops genius was PLUTO (pipeline under the ocean) one of the great scientific feats of the war which eventually supplied the front lines after the invasion of Normandy.

A small-scale raid is one thing, but a large incursion involves complicated logistics and supply lines. Dieppe proved the difficulties in seizing an enemy-controlled port, so Combined Ops went to work designing artificial

harbours. Codenamed Mulberry, there would have been no D-Day without these moveable ports designed by Mountbatten's crack scientists. Mountbatten took his scientists to the conference at Quebec, where Winston and FDR sat with Canadian Premier Mackenzie King. "I called him in to give the Chiefs of Staff the idea of an artificial harbour providing enough shelter for disembarking," Mountbatten told the Royal Society, adding: "We went into one of the big bathrooms where Bernal made little paper ships. First of all the paper ships were put at one end of the bath and an officer making waves showed



that they could soon be sunk. Then Bernal used an inflatable swimming collar which he stretched across the bath. This absorbed the movement of the waves and the little paper ships survived. There was no doubt that Bernal's demonstration together with his extremely able exposition of the subject helped tip the scales with the Chiefs of Staff and made Mr

Churchill more enthusiastic than ever." Mulberry was one of the most important innovations of the war, but though he was integral in its planning, Mountbatten would not be present to see D-Day unfold. It was also at Quebec that Churchill and Roosevelt made Admiral Mountbatten, just 43, Supreme Allied Commander, South East Asia Command. He was now

**"WE WISH TO TELL YOU AT THIS MOMENT IN YOUR ARDUOUS CAMPAIGN THAT WE REALISE THAT MUCH OF THIS REMARKABLE TECHNIQUE, AND THEREFORE THE SUCCESS OF THE VENTURE, HAS ITS ORIGIN IN DEVELOPMENTS EFFECTED BY YOU"**



on par with the likes of Generals MacArthur, Eisenhower and Lord Wavell. Mountbatten would be in the Far East when the Allies crossed the Channel and stormed the beaches, but his role was not forgotten. He would now be charged with applying his penchant for innovation and military diplomacy toward revitalising a command overwhelmed by the Japanese. While he was in Asia, a cable arrived:

"Today we visited the British and American armies on the soil of France. We sailed through vast fleets of ships with landing craft of many types pouring more men, vehicles and stores ashore. We saw clearly the manoeuvre in process of rapid development. We have shared our secrets in common and helped each other all we could. We wish to tell you at this moment in your arduous campaign that we realise that much of this remarkable technique, and therefore the success of the venture, has its origin in developments effected by you and your Staff of Combined Operations.

Signed: Arnold, Marshall, King, Brooke, Smuts, Churchill." □

**LEFT** Mountbatten, stood behind Winston Churchill, at the Casablanca Conference. (NARA)

**BELOW** Lord Mountbatten (right, in black) watching a landing exercise at Dundonald Camp, Ayreshire, Scotland.

Look out for part two, coming in your next issue of Britain at War.