

Almost 40 years to the day after she ran aground, the extraordinary tale of the Sugar Boat is an eerie warning to Clyde seafarers



INCREDIBLE HULK

furtively about at night – notably the great Trident submarines from their Faslane lair.

There have been notable casualties over the years.

When the American Civil War broke out, the North immediately imposed a blockade on the Southern Confederacy, and within weeks agents reached Britain in urgent quest (and with much gold) for fast steamers capable of ‘blockade-running’ and bringing vital supplies.

Spies for the Union came scampering after them, and ports the length of Britain soon hosted the most ridiculous cloak-and-dagger episodes as Confederates bid stupid money for ships and Yankees tried desperately to find out what they were up to.

In 1862, David Hutcheson & Co were readily persuaded to part with their elegant 1855 paddler, the Iona; she was fast, well-appointed and – to the beleaguered South – irresistible.

Suitably refitted and stuffed with all manner of goodies, the Iona sailed furtively one dark night for America – and never made it past the Cloch Light, a mere three miles south-west of Greenock. She was hit by an unidentified vessel and sank rapidly in 90ft of water.

Hutcheson's built a new Iona in 1863 and this, too, they were persuaded to sell for the same purpose. She also slunk away from the Clyde one murky night, and was only marginally more successful – being wrecked off the Isle of Lundy in the Bristol Channel.

And there have been far more

recent misadventures. In the spring of 1970, the little MacBrayne passenger ferry Lochshiel took her annual break from service at Iona and chugged her way through the Crinan Canal for an overhaul at the Gareloch.

ON the night of April 28, sailing up the Firth from Ardrishaig, she was run down by some vast and unidentified vessel, which did not even bother to stop.

Thankfully, all the crew survived, but what is left of their command sits forlornly at the bottom of the Clyde.

Far more horrific was the fate of the Maillé Brézé, though it is little remembered today.

Her tragedy came during the Second World War, the casualties were French, and at the time – with all the controls and censorship of the ‘national emergency’ – it was deftly hushed up.

The Maillé Brézé was a substantial Free French destroyer – at 2,400 tons, almost a light cruiser – and, on April 30, 1940, at anchor off Greenock, effectively (and inexplicably) she committed suicide.

Somehow, one of her torpedoes fired, not blasting away into the open Firth – which would have been bad enough – but amidships aboard the vessel herself.

When it detonated just under the bridge, it mangled everything

for'ard in a chaos of ripped metal and started a calamitous fire.

Many men were killed or maimed by the catastrophic blast. But many more were helplessly trapped, within the ship – hatches practically welded shut by the explosion; great steel doors jammed fast on mangled hinges. As the fire took hold, ever so slowly, the terrified French sailors began to cook to death.

Men of another destroyer HMS Firedrake, moored nearby, lowered two whalers and rowed as fast as they could to board and help.

They arrived to a twofold emergency – a ship afire and full not just of trapped and anguished men, but laden with torpedoes and shells and about to explode, with potentially terrible consequences for Greenock.

Even by the standards of Second World War heroism, the courage shown by these Royal Navy rescuers was peerless. In one operation, they rescued as many of the French sailors as they could and ferried them swiftly back to HMS Firedrake, returning with as much fire-fighting kit as they could handle.

Separately, and simultaneously, they tried to douse the flames, as the Maillé Brézé grew hotter and hotter, the screams ever more harrowing and the scent of burning flesh the more nauseous.

The doctor in the party tried to treat as many of the injured as he could; and all this aboard a ship that might at any instant blow up like a gigantic bomb.

The fire took invincible hold and it

became obvious both that the Maillé Brézé would shortly sink and that those men trapped in the hull were beyond rescue.

In final, cold-headed resolve, the doctor could do no more for these wretched sailors – extending beseeching arms through tiny portholes – than administer massive injections, time and again, into willing limb after willing limb, of merciful, lethal morphine.

There were 38 souls aboard when the French destroyer finally foundered, just over two hours after the torpedo mishap.

It has been asserted – though not proven – that her officers scuttled her as the only way to avert a potentially catastrophic explosion, and there is still great confusion as to how many men died.

Mercifully for the Captayannis, rescue was near at hand – and utterly effective.

As, more and more, she leaned over, the tug Labrador, Clyde Marine Motoring's sturdy passenger boat Rover and two Greenock pilot vessels reached the scene.

The Sugar Boat's crew were able simply to jump straight onto various assorted decks. So 25 men were taken safely to land.

Captain Ionnis and the Captayannis's officers waited aboard the tug Labrador in the hope that – come daybreak and better weather – they

might just rescue their command from a watery death.

It was a vain hope. Come morning, the Captayannis was finished – laid flat on her side, stuck inexorably in the sand and awash from stem to stern, beyond retrieval or succour.

As the months and then years went by, she proved beyond even demolition.

For one, there was no immediate need to dismantle her: the highly visible hulk was well clear of the shipping lanes and no threat.

For another, maritime law – and the deciphering of responsibility and ownership from behind a tangle of regulations and flags of convenience and ‘liability shields’ – is a jungle beyond the comprehension of the typical landlubber.

It proved impossible to find out who did own the Captayannis, even before the costly toil could begin to make them do something about her.

On a reef or amidst hard jaggy rocks, the sea itself would have demolished her very quickly; but on such soft, gluggy ground the hulk has survived remarkably well.

Some talked of the Royal Navy simply blowing her up; but she sits near Ardmore Point – an important bird sanctuary.

Today, she is a sanctuary in her own right – a dark, rusty but thriving ecosystem for all sorts of sea creatures.

She is, besides, mute and enduring, an abiding reminder that – even at the very harbour gates – we ought never take the sea for granted.