

Written by Quentin Rees
The Mk 7 two man sailing canoe
The Exhibition at The National Maritime Museum in Falmouth, Cornwall, (NMMC) is hosting a very special first time exhibition of British Military Canoes of World War 2. The exhibition and information is based on the recently published book of the same name - 'The Cockleshell Canoes' by Quentin Rees published by Amberley at £19.99. For anyone who wants the complete history and 'gripping tale' it is recommended.

This small exhibition has an interactive screen which takes the viewer into the different sections where one can learn more about the canoes on display and the background of the men who used them. One canoe is that of the kind used on 'The Frankton Raid' in 1942 (of Cockleshell heroes fame) : only two men survived the raid out of ten. This canoe is only one of six known of in the world and is in the most original condition of all. It is a 15 ft long Mark 2 two man canoe which has a flat bottom; great for pulling over mudflats on each of the five nights following hiding up during the daylight hours. The Commando operation in 1942 covered over 90 miles in atrocious paddling weather having been dropped off by submarine ten miles offshore in the freezing December weather. This canoe has canvas sides and can fold down, vertically, to 6 1/2 inches! The bigger brother to the Mk2 , the Mk 2** showing just how collapsible it was
Of the two aluminium canoes both these are two -man sectional bulkheaded canoes with catamaran type outriggers on either side of the hull supported by alloy arms. These outriggers contain ping pong balls - just in case they are holed by bullets. The three bulkheaded sections are connected and the bow and stern have hatches.
Both can be sailed and paddled but only one is also motorised with the engine housed in the stern section. This type is a Mk 9, the other is a Mk 7 - both are rare beasts also.
What is interesting to note is that both these canoe were manufactured by skilled aircraft engineers to aircraft standard in Birmabright. These were ocean going canoe for use in the tropics.
These 'Most Secret' canoes have remained unresearched until now; it has taken eight years of research by the author to bring this complete section of British Military Maritime History to the world.
It is a rare treat to view something that has been unknown since WW2. The exhibition has proved so popular that the exhibition has been extended until the end of April 09.
Its unlikely you will get to see these very rare canoes for some while, so take the opportunity and visit the NMM at Falmouth before the end of April.
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