



Thomas Corbett writes:

My grandfather, Hugh Corbett, who has died aged 95, was the inaugural captain of *HMS Fearless*, the Royal Navy's first amphibious assault ship.

Hugh entered the navy in 1933, serving during the second world war with the destroyers *HMS Brazen*, which was sunk in 1940, *HMS Lookout* – probably the most bombed destroyer to survive the war – and *HMS Wheatland*, of which he was captain. He was mentioned in dispatches for his 'conspicuous cheerfulness under air attack' and was awarded the DSC, and the DSO in 1945. After the war he served on the carrier *HMS Illustrious*, either side of staff positions in Whitehall and Malta.

In 1950 Hugh was promoted to commander on operations during the Korean war. In 1961 he took command of *HMS Caesar* for two years, then based at Hong Kong. On his return home, he became the chief staff officer to Admiral of the Fleet Earl Mountbatten of Burma, and was involved in significant decisions on nuclear weapons and changes to higher management. In 1968 Hugh was appointed CBE. But it was his time as captain of *HMS Fearless*, from 1965 to 1967, that he was most proud of.

He wrote in the ship's commission book: *It seems almost incredible to me that we came together as strangers so short a while ago at the end of 1965 to an uncompleted ship. To live through this period of such rapid progress is a stirring experience. Rarely has a new concept proved itself so quickly. We can now say with confidence the words which we spoke in faith at our commissioning ceremony: 'We are Fearless, we fear nothing!'* Indeed, he described the ship's company as the best he had ever had.

Among his grandchildren, Hugh was known for his sayings, such as 'proud to know you' and 'never say can't'. He was full of humility and we were often curious to reconcile what we knew of him as our grandfather with perceptions of what a captain would be like.

He enjoyed life, where others might grumble. If he was sitting at the end of the table as food was passed in the other direction, he would joke of being left in 'starvation corner'. My last memory of him was when he relied on a team of brilliant carers in Shetland, where he lived with my grandmother, Patricia, whom he had married in 1945. Though his mind and body were tired, his face would light up when visitors came. Just a few weeks before he died, he met his great-grandson, Albert, and played along to the actions of *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star* with him.

Hugh had an inquiring mind. When he retired from the navy, he read extensively about faith and knowledge and became the vice-chairman of the Churches' Fellowship for Psychological and Spiritual Studies. He was keen to stress that 'miracles happen, albeit exceptionally'. He is survived by Patricia, three sons, Patrick, Andrew and Henry, six grandchildren, and Albert.

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Capt Hugh Corbett CBE DSO DSC

On the night of November 1 1944, Corbett was in command of the Hunt-class destroyer *Wheatland*, leading the destroyer *Avon Vale* northwards through the shipping lanes inshore of the island of Lussino in the northern Adriatic. His mission was to prevent the evacuation of German troops from Dalmatia, and, keeping his ships hidden against the shadow of the land, he was watching carefully over the Quarnerolo Channel when he spotted two German corvettes, UJ-205 and UJ-208.

Increasing to full speed, and lighting the channel with star shell, Corbett opened fire with four-inch guns at 4,000 yards, and in a fierce exchange quickly reduced one corvette to a wreck and blew up the other. *Avon Vale* had stopped to pick up survivors when a third German ship, the ex-Italian torpedo boat-destroyer TA-20, rounded a headland and opened fire before turning to flee.

Corbett gave chase, and in a running fight sank TA-20. The action was over in half an hour, and 71 German survivors were pulled from the water that night and 20 more the next day. Corbett was awarded a DSO.

Hugh Askew Corbett was born on June 25 1916 in Stepney. His father, the Rev Frederick St John Corbett, vicar of St George-in-the-East, died of Spanish flu in 1919 after ministering to the thousands of sick in crowded East London tenements.

After education at St Edmunds, Canterbury, Hugh joined the Royal Navy in 1933. His first ship was the battleship *Ramillies*, but thereafter most of his seagoing career was in destroyers.

At the outbreak of war Corbett was junior hand in *Impulsive*, but was soon appointed first lieutenant of *Brazen*. He was due to leave her to take a course in torpedo and anti-submarine warfare, but insisted on staying at sea.

On 15 April 1940, while escorting a landing force to Harstad during the Norwegian campaign, *Brazen* and her fellow destroyer *Fearless* attacked the German submarine U-49. Five depth charges were dropped and the U-boat burst to the surface. All but one of the 42-man crew were saved, and while engaged in the rescue work *Brazen* picked up papers which gave the entire U-boat disposition for the German invasion of Norway. Corbett was mentioned in despatches.

After *Brazen* was sunk off Dover by German aircraft on July 20 1940, Corbett served briefly as first lieutenant in the Hunt-class *Tyndale*, and in June 1941 he joined the newly-built *Lookout*, which took part in Arctic convoys, in Operation Ironclad (the occupation of Madagascar) and Operation Pedestal (to resupply Malta).

Under a new commanding officer, in May 1943 Corbett took part in Operation Retribution, which prevented the escape by sea of German forces from North Africa to Sicily. Only a few hundred Germans escaped the blockade, and Corbett was awarded a DSC.

In September 1943 Corbett was given command of *Wheatland*, and was at the Allied landings at Salerno until deployed to the Adriatic.

Post-war, between staff appointments, he commanded the destroyers *Charity* and *Cockade* (1954-56) and *Caesar* (1960-62); he was also Captain of the 8th Destroyer Squadron.

In 1965 Corbett was given the task of bringing the assault ship *Fearless* into service. The following year *Fearless* was fully operational, and in October 1967 she enabled Irish Guards ferried in RAF helicopters to mount a surprise raid on rebels in Oman. Corbett's last appointment was as Head of Naval Manpower Future Policy in 1967. He retired in 1969, a year after being appointed CBE.

Corbett then became Warden of the University Centre, Cambridge, which offers social facilities for graduate and research students.

Hugh Corbett married, in 1945, Patricia Spens, who survives him with their three sons.