

# BY AN OLD HYDROGRAPHER

## 'As it Was'

In 2004 the Provincial Government of the Åland Islands in Finland celebrated the 150th Anniversary of the destruction of Bomarsund, the great, Russian fortress built during the occupation of 1808 to 1854. Much of the credit for this rests with a British naval hydrographic surveyor, Captain Bartholomew Sullivan.

It is sometimes forgotten that the war against Russia in the mid-1850s was not waged only in the Crimea, but that there was a "second front", so to speak, in the Baltic between March 1854 and August 1855. Whilst the war in the Crimea was fought almost entirely on land, the Baltic campaign was mainly one of combined operations. A fleet of British and French warships, commanded initially by Vice-Admiral Sir Charles Napier, landed troops to destroy Russian forts and other outposts in the northern Baltic and thus drive the Russian empire back onto the Russian mainland.

The most western of these outposts were in the Åland Islands, at the entrance to the Gulf of Bothnia. In 1808 the Åland Islands, then part of Sweden, were invaded by Russian troops and despite some resistance, by September 1809 the Russians occupied Åland, together with the whole of Finland. Russia realised that this western outpost would need defending against attack, especially from Sweden, and she set about building a number of fortifications, by far the largest of which was to be at Bomarsund, roughly in the middle of the archipelago. This was to be a massive structure: a great fortified circle over 1,100 metres in diameter and over 3,000 metres in circumference – the largest building project ever planned on Åland. It was to contain 350 cannon, barracks, storehouses and a hospital. A further seven separate defensive towers mounting 150 cannon were planned, but only three were eventually built. The garrison was to number some 5,000 soldiers. The planning itself took some two decades and building work began in 1830, the main fort being started in 1832 and largely completed by 1844. It was this fort that was to be the main focus of action in the summer of 1854.

In the 1830s Britain began to take an interest in the building works at Bomarsund. It was feared that, as it commanded a large stretch of enclosed water with narrow entrances (Lumparn, in principle not unlike Scapa Flow), it could become a major fleet base for Russia far to the west of Cronstadt. The fear was that trade in the Baltic, largely dominated at that time by Britain, could be seriously affected. The principal approach to this anchorage was from the north and the Russians had placed massive towers to command these channels. There was one other narrow channel, Nagelsund, to the south-east of Bomarsund, but this was not thought to be navigable by the larger sailing ships of the day and the Russians considered it defensible by gunboats.

In early 1854 the British government decided that Bomarsund was too much of a threat and that it should be destroyed. A combined fleet of British and French ships, including some steam ships, duly sailed in March. By early spring Åland was blockaded and the captain of the surveying paddle-steamer *Lightning*, Captain Bartholomew Sullivan, a hydrographic specialist, anchored his ship east of Michelsån Island. Landing from boats, he led a small party to the top of a high cliff on the western side where, stretched out on the sparse dry grass, they were able with field glasses to carry out a detailed reconnaissance of the fortifications but a mile and a quarter distant. Captain Sullivan then carried out a detailed survey of Nagelsund to determine whether a passage through it was feasible. In June three ships, led by Captain Hall in HMS *Hecla*, steamed through (without Napier's approval) and carried out an indecisive bombardment of Bomarsund that had little effect on the fort and ended only when the ships ran low on ammunition. It was as a result of an incident during this action that the first naval Victoria Cross was awarded. This went to Acting Mate Charles Lucas, who threw overboard a shell that had landed on the deck of the *Hecla* with its fuse still fizzing; it exploded before it hit the water and Lucas undoubtedly saved many lives.

Napier was not best pleased with Hall's action, for it had revealed to the Russians that small steam-ships, at least, could pass through Nagelsund. It was fortunate that the Russians did not have the gunboats that were meant to defend this passage. In July Napier decided to move his main battle fleet into Lumparn through Nagelsund. To ensure their safe passage Captain Sullivan in *Lightning* led the large-screw, line-of-battle ships through the narrow passage on 22nd July; 25 ships were then able to blockade Bomarsund whilst awaiting the arrival of troops that would land and attack the fortress, then defended by about 2,200 Russians. In early August, 10,000 French soldiers, together with about 1,000 British soldiers and marines, landed ashore and surrounded the fortress.

The assault on the outer forts began on 13th August and these were suppressed in two days. During 15th and 16th August the main fort was bombarded from both land and sea. Its unconditional surrender was accepted on the afternoon of 16th August. The surviving 2,000 Russian and Finnish troops were thereafter transported to prisons in France and Britain.

On 12th August, shortly before the assault began, a curious incident ashore led to the award of two more Victoria Crosses. Having learned that despatches from Czar to Bomarsund were due to be landed on Vårdö Island, a Lieutenant John Bythesea and a Stoker William Johnstone were landed from HMS *Arrogant* to try to intercept them, Johnstone being a Swedish-speaker. A friendly farmer concealed these men for three days and when the five Russians carrying the despatches appeared Bythesea and Johnstone ambushed them. Two Russians fled whilst the other three were captured and ordered to row their captors back to their ship!

A memorial stone made of granite from the Bomarsund fortress and dedicated to these three winners of the Victoria Cross was unveiled on 21st June 2004 by the British Ambassador to Finland, Mr Matthew Kirk. The memorial stands on a grassy slope near the fortress,

overlooking the great expanse of water, Lumparn, the scene of the combined fleet action more than 150 years ago.

At the beginning of September 1854 the fortress itself was destroyed by explosives. Only the ruins, now preserved, remain to show the enormous former structure of Bomarsund. The provincial government of Åland decided that the 150th anniversary of these significant events in the islands' history should be marked with a series of events. One of these was a re-enactment, albeit on a very small scale, of the passage through Ångörsund in a topsail schooner, Albanus. I was privileged to be amongst the passengers on board – the only representative of the Royal Navy. But it was perhaps appropriate that such a representative should have been a retired Hydrographer who had also commanded the most recent HMS *Hecla* on three occasions.

We left Mariehamn, the capital of Åland, in the early forenoon of 26th July and, after motoring to clear the southern corner of Lemland, turned northwards. In bright sunny weather we then set all plain sail to pass through the wide sound between low wooded islands that led towards the rather narrower southern entrance of Ångörsund. The Captain's day job was as Master of one of the many huge ferries that pass back and forth between Helsinki, Stockholm and Åland, but he remarked that he much preferred sailing Albanus. Several of his young crew had taken part in Tall Ships' races recalling, maybe, the Ålanders who used to man the great four-masted barques from the islands that in earlier years used to bring wheat from Australia to Europe during round trips that took over eight months each year. Indeed, one of the other passengers was the daughter of Sven Eriksson, the last Captain of the most famous of them all, Herzogin Cecilie, which was wrecked off the south coast of Devon in April 1936.

Passing through Ångörsund in the early afternoon, it was possible to distinguish features that appear in the well-known painting by Oswald Brierly. This shows Lightning leading the British fleet through on 22nd July 1854 and is now in the National Maritime Museum at Greenwich, England. It has to be said, though, that Brierly applied a fair amount of artist's licence in this painting so as to impress the English public, for the passage is not as narrow or quite as tortuous as indicated in the painting. A large ship passing through it for the first time would, however, certainly have found it challenging, and much confidence would have been placed by the warships' Captains in Sullivan's skills as a surveyor and pilot as he led the fleet through in Lightning.

There were very relevant echoes of this lead-through procedure during the first Gulf War in 1990 when the more modern surveying ship HMS *Herald*, using high-precision fixing techniques, led a United States battleship through the narrow passage between mine-fields off Kuwait so that she could bombard Iraqi coastal positions. History does indeed repeat itself!

Later in the day, Albanus berthed at the jetty below Bomarsund and guests were given a conducted tour of the fortress by the resident site archaeologist, Mr Graham Robins, and local historian Mr Jakka Årgeans. At the site of the new memorial to the three naval VCs I was able to display and discuss with other guests and officials a replica of this medal, together with a genuine British campaign medal for the Baltic awarded to a Royal Marine private. This private had served in the older Hecla and had probably known Charles Lucas.