

The man who loved Harbour Island and the rescue boat he left behind



A US Air Force 63 foot (19.20 m) Mark II air sea rescue boat.

FREDRICK A Ross was born in Greenock, Scotland, in May of 1920. During World War II, he joined the Royal Air Force and was assigned to a crash boat division called No 250 Air Sea Rescue Unit. His function was as an engineer, and he made himself so useful that even though they were based at Montagu Foreshore in Nassau, Fred obtained the coveted posting to Dunmore Town, Harbour Island, as often as he could. The men stayed at The Little Guest House, run by sisters, and apparently so much fun was had that an RAF accountant had to fly to Harbour Island after the war just to negotiate final payments.

After the war, Mr Ross returned to Scotland, married Ella Mae Curry, and had a daughter, however he was as determined as ever to return to Harbour Island, and return they did. Once back, he opened Ross Garage at Colebrook Street, at a property he bought from historian Paul Albury, and became island institutions. Known as “Pa Fred,” he lived to age 91, passing away in January, 2012.

This is the story behind a family photograph of a rescue boat named HMS P-339 which Fred cared for, how it lured him back after a busy wartime career, and then blew up at the fuel dock in Harbour Island, only to be towed across the

By Eric Wiberg



way to Three Islands dock on North Eleuthera, where it was cut loose in shallow water and remains there today, within sight of the busy ferry dock.

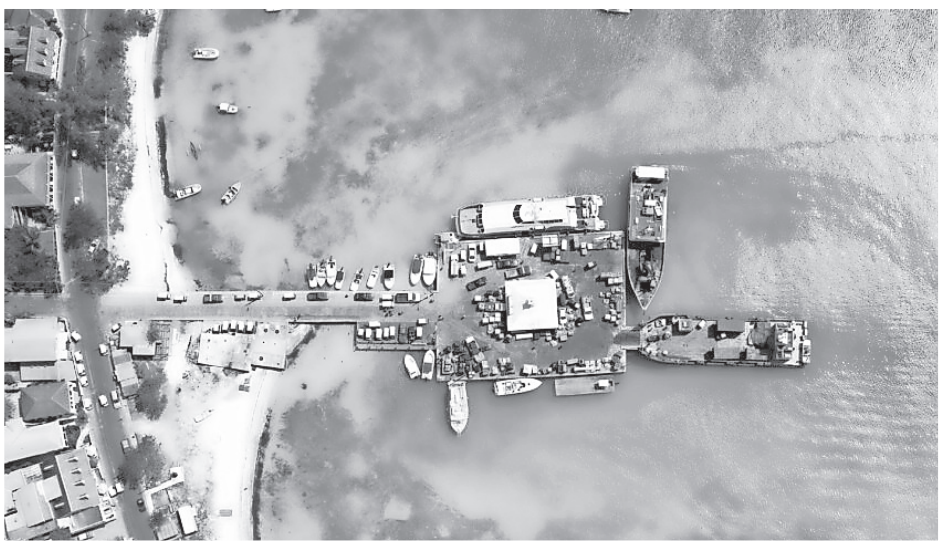
First, some dates. By mid-1942, the RAF had two large air bases in New Providence, No 113 RAFTC Wing Transport at Windsor Field, and OTU111 at Oakes Field. Since nearly 200 aircraft had accidents or were lost, they needed crash boats stationed throughout The Bahamas to go and find them, quickly. These were spread from Mayaguana to Exuma, Bimini to Walker's Cay, Clifton and Montague Bays on New Providence near Nassau, Royal Island and Harbour Island, Eleuthera.

Number 250 Air-Sea Rescue Unit was formed on September 1, 1943, at Harbour Island and Nassau and disbanded on 10 October 1945. “It was equipped with amphibious aircraft and fast launches, whose function was to rescue the crews of aircraft which came down in the sea and co-operate with naval forces in

the area.” They had seven boats: HMS P-190, HMS P-250, HMS P-191, HMS P-339, HMS P-89, HMS P-712, and HMS P-170. Tasks included finding dinghies, bodies, fuselage, retrieve IFF or “identify friend or foe” codes and other sensitive materials. These air and sea units were first administered by RAF Delegation, Washington, DC, then Dorval (Montreal) and finally their own HQ and administration in Nassau. They rented almost all the vehicles on the island, built hospitals, and requisitioned most of the hotels. Personnel in the unit included Sergeant J Curran, Peter S Penford, Group ASR Officer, and Wing Commander Garlick, Officer in Charge, ASR.

Ross served primarily on HMS P-339, likely a British Power Boat Company Type Two HSL “Whaleback” which was 63 feet long, 18 feet wide, drew 4 feet, was 22 tons and had three Napier Sea Lion engines of 500hp each. The boats could make 36 knots, had nine crew, and could range up to 500 miles. On September 21, 1943, ASR launch P-339 was dispatched from Montagu Bay to the scene of a raft, then it was learned a Baltimore-type bomber plane had landed on the beach in northwest Andros, and a dinghy put to sea to attract attention. P-339 was unable to approach near shore because of shallow water, so it was instructed to stand-by and await high tide, then approach. Before that, a blimp picked up two survivors and took them to hospital, so P-339 returned to base.

The next day, another aircraft ditched in the sea just two miles north of Tarpum Bay, Eleuthera, with depth charges aboard. The crew were uninjured except the radio operator who had face injuries. HMS P-712 was dispatched from Harbour Island, arrived at Rock Sound, found and



ABOVE: The remains of the hull are roughly in the center of this aerial of Three Islands dock, North Eleuthera. Below: On the bow one of the men is Ross of this uniquely valuable family heirloom.



took the majority of the aircrew to Nassau and berthed at Prince George Dock. Later, an amphibious Mariner aircraft observed a dinghy, and HMS P-339 was instructed to proceed to that position. However, they were unable to remain at sea due to an oil leak resulting in significant oil loss.

On another occasion, a B-25 bomber sighted a disabled Mariner PBY plane signaling at sea. HMS P-339 was told to put to sea to locate it, which it did, and managed to attach a towing line to it and began pulling the floating plane towards Eleuthera. Then the US Navy seaplane tender or depot ship USS Christiana IX stationed at Royal Island took over the arduous tow from HMS P-339 as its tow-rope was unable to stand the strain, so P-339 returned to base.

On December 13, 1944, the US Navy submarine chaser USS SC-1059 ran aground at night in Fleeming Channel, near Current, Eleuthera. An ASR boat out of Montagu arrived immediately, launched a wherry, or small row boat and in rough seas transferred 11 men to a large US Navy tug then left.

On April 26, 1944, HMS P-339 was instructed to put to sea and to rendezvous with the frigate HMS Dominica to search for the dinghy of a downed plane. In 1944, HMS P-89 left

Harbour Island to pick up the airmen, then rendezvoused at Ship Channel Cay with HMS P-191 from Nassau.

On D-Day, June 6, 1944, HMS P-712 was dispatched from Harbour Island to Rock Sound to find downed pilots from a bomber. By January 8, 1946, VE-Day and VJ-Day were passed and the Bahamas RAF base population for No 250 ASR dwindled to just 14 non-officers, so “by request of the Garrison Commander and the Colonial Secretary, two Air Sea Rescue [ASR] craft were employed in evacuating repatriates and released service personnel from the Island Monarch. The boat anchored outside the bar and an officers’ reception party proceeded to welcome the repatriates” to Nassau Harbour. Other duties were pulling boats and seaplanes back to safety when they dragged anchors in harbour.

In January 1946, the RAF rented part of Clerihew House [owned by Sir Harry Oakes and formerly Belmont School] for the transfer of ASR personnel from Fort Montagu Hotel.

On 16 January, “ASR Officers took Clerihew as Headquarters for duty crew only, and the remainder were transferred to barrack blocks on the camp. The moorings for the ASR vessels remained in Montagu Bay, pending the loan of the port dredger for their

transfer to sites opposite Clerihew House.” Then on March 22, “F/Lt EH Lang, Accountant Officer departed for Harbour Island to investigate, at the request of RAF Delegation, Washington, a claim for compensation submitted by the owner of The Little Boarding House in which ASR personnel were billeted 1943 to 1945.” The war was truly over.

After their stint of about three years in Scotland, the Rosses returned to The Bahamas by ship with Patricia in 1948 and remained there since, growing a family of three daughters and two sons. Pa Fred’s obituary ran in both The Tribune and Guardian. He is buried at the Anglican Church in Harbour Island. As for HMS P-339, the sequence is difficult to ascertain, however the likeliest scenario is that the boat was sold locally in Eleuthera or simply left behind. What is known is that HMS P-339 blew up fueling, which is not entirely uncommon with fume buildup, high heat and prevalent smoking. The hulk – probably still burning – was towed to Three Islands dock, visible in the shallow bay to the east of the dock which all passengers in transit from the Queens Highway and airport or Spanish Wells by car and boat must use. It remains there to this day.



HISTORIC Dunmore Town, named after Lord Dunmore, Governor 1786-1797, is the main and only town on Harbour Island and one of the oldest settlements in the Bahamas.

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By July 21th, 2024