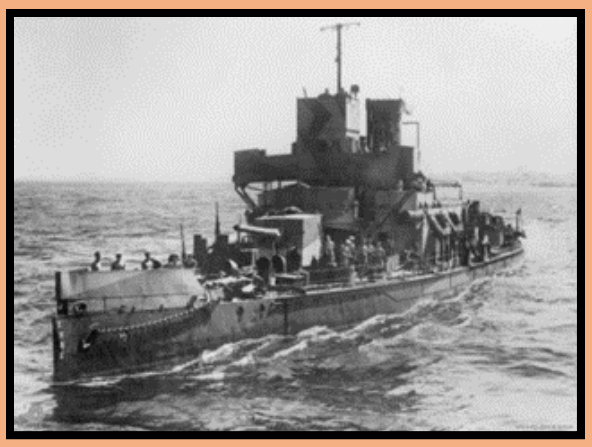


The China Patrol

River Yangste Gunboats

By Geoff Walker

To bring the Chinese Opium Wars to an end, in 1842 the Qing authorities sued for peace, which concluded with the Treaty of Nanking, which was signed on a British warship, negotiated in August of that year, and ratified in 1843. In the treaty, China was compelled to pay an indemnity to Britain, open five treaty ports to all foreign nations, and cede Hong Kong to Queen Victoria. In the supplementary Treaty of the Bogue, the Qing Empire also recognized Britain as an equal to China, and bestowed British subjects, extraterritorial privileges in treaty ports. This brought about the requirement for a flotilla of small and well-armed warships that could be employed around the coastal areas and up the large meandering rivers of China, with the view to policing and protecting newfound colonial interests. Hence, was born the “China Gunboat” and the “China Patrol”.

British. Royal Navy gunboats serving in Chinese waters, acted as "Station Ships to fly the Flag", assigned to specific ports and were designed, more or less exclusively for shallow water river operations. The RN maintained patrols and escorts up and down the Yangtze River, from its main base in Shanghai, until the end of the International Concessions in 1941.

These river gunboats were often used by the major powers to protect their interests overseas – trade, shipping, property, and safety and security of their national citizens - from local conflicts, piracy, and other hostile acts. Accordingly, the term **“Send a Gunboat”** evolved and was frequently heard to echo from the chambers of power, with the gunboat being viewed as a quick and easy solution to many an uprising, or episode of potential civil unrest, disobedience, or similar tricky problem, arising in the colonies. Two typical examples were the use of such craft in China, by the British under the terms of the various treaties concluded after the Opium Wars, and by the French in a more traditional colonial role, in their Indo-China colonies.

At one time or another, nine nations have had gunboats stationed on the Yangtze River: Britain (for exactly 100 years), France, Austria- Hungary, Germany, Russia, Japan, Portugal, USA – and of course, China. Such warships were typically shallow-draft vessels, strongly built to support the rigors of navigation in rivers strewn with sandbanks and other hazards. For its size, the river gunboat was well-armed with one or two small or medium caliber guns and light machine guns. The larger, river gunboats, had a complement of such size as to be able to land an armed force of officers and men to make a show of military dominance and, if necessary, to contain any situation until reinforcements arrived or diplomats reached a solution.

Typically, these gunboats carried two officers and sometimes a doctor, six or seven petty officers and leading seamen, plus 17 able seamen. The remainder of the 50-odd souls aboard were Chinese servants,

cooks, seamen, and the black gang. Of course, the Royal Navy had three generations of gunboats on the Yangtze River spanning fifty years. The first were the Heron-class river gunboats, of which HMS Nightingale (1897-98) and HMS Robin, HMS Sandpiper, HMS Snipe served on the Yangtze and West Rivers until 1914 and were sold in 1919. Later, in the Woodcock Class of gunboats came into service: these included the HMS Woodcock, HMS Moorhen, HMS Teal and HMS Widgeon.

The most outstanding type of British Gunboat was the 12 "Insect" class vessels (Aphis, Bee, Cicala, Cockchafer, Cricket, Glowworm, Gnat, Ladybird, Mantis, Moth, Scarab and Tarantula) built between February 1915 and March 1916. Half of them were still serving in World War II. One of this class, HMS Moth led a particularly varied career. Laid down in March 1915 and launched that October, it was designated for service in China, but soon after its commissioning on Jan. 5, 1916, it was sent to the Persian Gulf to join the Tigris River flotilla on the Mesopotamian campaign, where it helped the British retake Kut on Feb. 23, 1917, followed by Baghdad on March 11. Reassigned to support the North Russia Intervention against the Bolsheviks, HMS Moth arrived at Archangel in June 1919 and operated along the Dvina River until British forces withdrew at year's end. By 1920 the gunboat was in China, where it served until 12th December 1941, when scuttled off Hong Kong. However, the Japanese salvaged the gunboat, renamed it Suma, and used it against Chinese insurgents on the Yangtze River. It was eventually sunk after striking a mine.

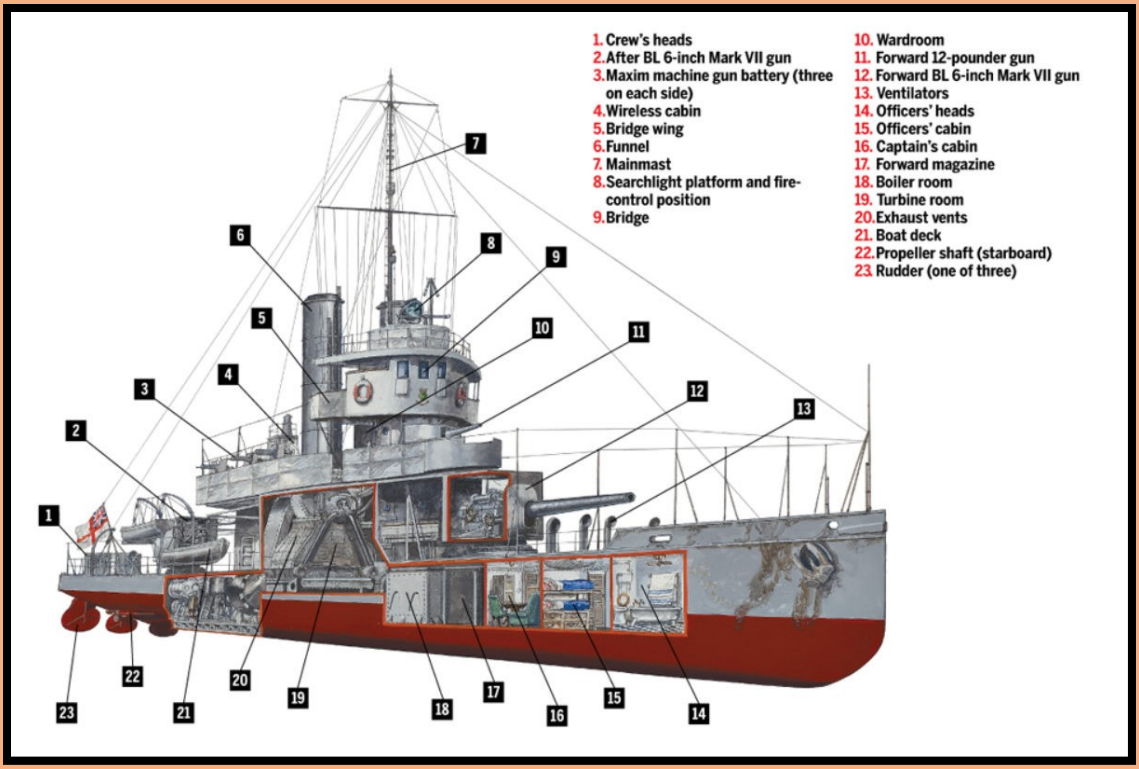
The Insect class gunboats (known in the RN as large China gunboats) were a class of small, but well-armed Royal Navy ships designed for use in shallow rivers or inshore. The ships were designed to operate in shallow fast-flowing rivers, with a shallow draught and a good turn of speed to counter the strong river flow. They were fitted with two reciprocating engines operating two propeller shafts which provided some redundancy. The propellers were housed in tunnels to minimize the operating draught.

Specification of the "Insect" Class of Gunboat

Length: 237 feet 6 inches
Beam: 36 feet 1 inch
Draft: 4 feet
Displacement: 645 tons
Power: Two Yarrow water-tube boilers feeding two reciprocating engines
Propulsion: Two expansion turbines driving in-turning propeller shafts
Speed: 14 knots
Armament: Two BL 6-inch Mark VII guns, two 12-pounders, six Maxim machine guns
Complement: 55



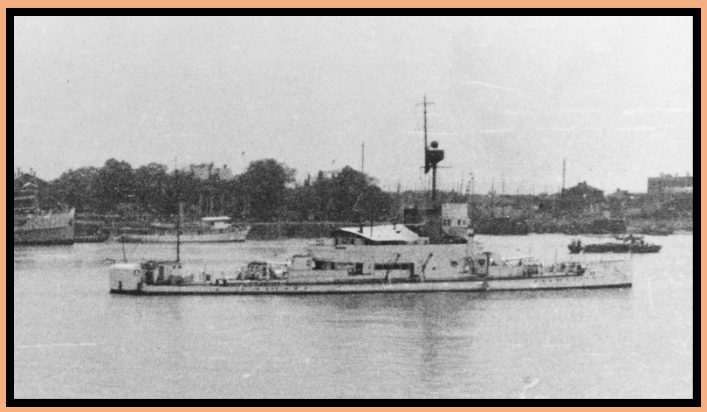
A profile view of an "Insect" Class Gunboat of the China Squadron. Year of construction 1915-16.



A cutaway view of the "Insect Class" Gunboat of the Royal Navy

HMS Bee was an "Insect Class" gunboat of the Royal Navy, launched on 8 December 1915. This class were also known as "Large China Gunboats". Initially, built for service on the River Danube, after World War I the "Insects" were transferred to China, and served on the Yangtze River. In 1920, HMS Bee became the flagship of the Yangtze patrol.

On 12 December 1937, **HMS Bee**, along with **HMS Ladybird**, became involved in the Panay incident and came under fire from a Japanese artillery unit near Wuhu on the Yangtze River. **HMS Ladybird** took six shells, whilst **HMS Bee** avoided any direct hits. **HMS Bee** was paid off in 1938 when the gunboat **HMS Scorpion**, the new flagship, arrived. **HMS Bee** was sold in Shanghai for scrap on 22 March 1939 for £5,225.



HMS Bee pictured whilst on station on the Yangste River, prior to her being withdrawn from service and sold for demolition in 1939.

Of course, during WW2 there was little activity of the Royal Navy in Chinese rivers and waters. However, this changed when, during the Chinese Civil War, what came to be known as the **"Yangste Incident"** becamne a historic event which involved the Royal Navy ships **HMS Amethyst**, **HMS Consort**, **HMS London**, and **HMS Black Swan** on the Yangtze River, for three months during the summer of 1949.



The Royal Navy Sloop **HMS Amethyst** pictured prior to the outbreak of the **"Yangste Incident".**
HMS Amethyst was a modified Black Swan-class sloop of the Royal Navy, launched in 1943. She was eventually scrapped in January 1957.

19 April 1949, during the Chinese Civil War between the nationalist Kuomintang-led Republic of China and the Chinese Communists, led my Mao Tse Tung, the Royal Navy sloop **HMS Amethyst** was on her way upstream along the Yangste River, from Shanghai to Nanking, the Chinese capital, to deliver supplies to the British Embassy and relieve the guard ship **HMS Consort.** Suddenly and without warning or provocation, she was fired upon by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) shore batteries. Following a heavy engagement, **HMS Amethyst** grounded in the mud, having sustained significant damage and with over 50 of her crew seriously wounded or dead, including the ship's commanding officer.

HMS Consort attempted to tow the stranded **HMS Amethyst** off the mud but was herself shelled and hit several times and was forced to withdraw. A further rescue attempt by two other RN ships also came under heavy fire and had to be abandoned.

An attempt to evacuate the wounded from **HMS Amethyst** was only partially successful – and news filtered back to the **HMS Amethyst** that several of her petty officers had been captured by the PLA and were being held at a nearby military hospital. The local senior communist official, a political commissar, made contact with **HMS Amethyst,** and at a meeting between senior officers made his position clear; if the British government did not release an apology accepting all responsibility for the entire incident, the **HMS Amethyst** would remain captive.

The British Naval Attaché in nearby Nanking, was then ordered to go to the beleaguered ship to take command, as the ship's First Lieutenant had also been seriously injured. Over ensuing 10 weeks, the new commanding officer managed to negotiate the release of his detained crew, meanwhile making temporary repairs to the ship.

Taking advantage of the pitch darkness, **HMS Amethyst** slipped her cable, maneuvered clear of the mudbank, and headed downstream following a local cargo ship, which **HMS Amethyst** used to show the way through the river shallows, by following her wake. Upon discovering the sloops escape, shore artillery opened fire, but the cargo ship received most of the PLA bombardment and caught fire and was last sighted well ablaze, while **HMS Amethyst** pressed on at top speed. After successfully negotiating various river obstructions and blockships, the **HMS Amethyst** finally reached Woosung, at the lower reaches of the Yangste River. Unfortunately**, HMS Amethyst** was inevitably spotted, and forced to engage PLA batteries in a lengthy exchange. However, the ship was successful in avoiding further serious damage and continued heading for the nearby river mouth in the company of **HMS Concord**, with which she had rendezvoused, and the safety of the ocean beyond.

Following a short stay at anchor, during which **HMS Concord** temporarily transferred some crew to **HMS Amethyst** to replace those of her ship's company caused by the fatalities and injuries, the two ships set sail for Hong Kong. The “Yangste Incident” (as it later became known) and subsequent successful escape of **HMS Amethyst,** received much acclaim and has been recorded as one of the most daring escapes in naval history.

The “China Squadron” was disbanded following the Chinese Civil War and the Far East center of operations transferred to **HMS Tamar** naval base at Hong Kong in conjunction with the Naval base in Singapore, **HMS Sembawang,** which until 1958 remained the main base for the Far East Fleet.

End

References: Numerous Naval archives, various Historical records, Military and Museum archives, Information available on the Public Domain from which much of the material for this article has been sourced.

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