

# Towering courage, selfless devotion: The perilous raid on St. Nazaire

*Phil Egan & Barb Swanson - November 2025*

*“They that have fought so well  
Come through the jaws of death  
Out of the mouths of hell.”*

William Shakespeare wrote, especially in Henry V, some of the most stirring words ever recorded on the theme of heroism and honour in the face of staggering odds. But even Shakespeare might have faltered in portraying the tale we’re about to recount. Imagine accepting a mission so perilous of life and limb that you were first taken to a slaughterhouse to prepare you for a landscape awash in blood. Told, in fact, that it was a suicide mission from which you were unlikely to return. Reminded how proud your parents would be of your sacrifice, and how your country would never forget.

That was the scenario faced by John Stutchbury at age 21.

John Forbes Stutchbury died in Sarnia in 1999, at age 79. His astonishing story, recounted in both books and film, was brought to us by Kevin McHarg. Kevin risked his own life every day of the 33 years he served with Sarnia Fire Rescue. If a man as brave as Kevin McHarg could be awestruck by the courage of John Stutchbury, we knew his story had to be an impressive one – especially in a month sacred to those who served and who risked their lives in time of war.

Royal Navy Lieutenant John Stutchbury was a British commando when he and over 600 of his “band of brothers” carried out a raid so dangerous, and so audacious, that it has become a legend in the annals of war. The target of the raid, designated Operation Chariot, was the massively fortified “Normandie Dock” in the German-occupied French coastal port of St. Nazaire. This deep-water dock was the Atlantic coast home port of the German battleship, Tirpitz. Her sister ship, the infamous Bismarck, had been sunk in May of 1941, nine months before the St. Nazaire Raid, leaving Tirpitz as the “terror of the seas.” Destroying the dock would prevent Tirpitz from having a safe Atlantic repair port, removing a major threat to Allied naval operations.

St. Nazaire was located 400 miles down the French coast, six miles inside the estuary of the River Loire. German gun batteries protected either side of a narrow channel. In the early hours of March 28, 1942, HMS Campbeltown, disguised as a German vessel and loaded with explosives, raced down the Loire towards the Normandie Dock. Yanking down the swastika flag and raising the Royal battle ensign, she smashed into the dock at full speed. The British force immediately came under heavy fire from 500 German defenders, as attackers poured from her decks and from 18 accompanying motor launches. Stutchbury was among the first to leap from Campbeltown, nearly slipping on a deck already slick with blood. A violent battle ensued with horrific British casualties. Some men burned alive in fuel-laden waters. Overwhelming firepower was brought to bear upon Stutchbury and his fellow raiders. Among the 622 men who fought at St. Nazaire, only 234 returned to Britain; 169 were killed and 213 were captured.

A delayed explosion aboard Campbeltown later that day detonated, destroying the dock and rendering the facility inoperable. Despite the high cost in lives, Operation Chariot was a critical strategic success. It denied Germany the use of an essential naval asset, neutralizing the threat of Tirpitz in the Atlantic. John Stutchbury and his team of St. Nazaire raiders fought that day with a splendid and indomitable spirit.

Wounded and imprisoned in Germany for three years, Stutchbury was awarded the Oak Leaf medal and the French Croix de Guerre. He emigrated to Canada after the war. John and his wife, Mary, made their home in Sarnia until John’s death 26 years ago. Walt Whitman could have been describing John Stutchbury when he wrote in Leaves of Grass:

*“The lives of great men all remind us  
We can make our lives sublime,  
And, departing, leave behind us  
Footprints on the sands of time.”*

On Remembrance Day and always, Sarnia remembers the sublime life and immortal valour of John Stutchbury.