

EXCLUSIVE
By Lord Ashcroft



HE IS the real-life “Q” – the mastermind of deadly gadgets and hidden firepower from countless James Bond films – and, when I met him at a secret location in Ukraine, he did not disappoint. His face and head were hidden behind a military cap and ski mask, while his eyes were covered by black wrap-around sunglasses. Not an inch of his skin was revealed, because he was also wearing a dark green cardigan, faded jeans and camouflage-patterned gloves.

In a second-floor office block on the outskirts of the Ukrainian capital of Kyiv, one of Russia’s biggest wartime targets was seated behind a large wooden table as I entered the room. He looked like a highly trained assassin and, in military terms, he is exactly that.

After giving me a firm handshake, he spelt out that the first rule for the interview was that my article must give no clues to his identity. However, that was an easy requirement because our meeting had been arranged by a shadowy intermediary and I knew nothing about the mysterious figure in front of me.

He asked me to refer to him only by his nickname, “Thirteenth”, and he would reveal nothing more than he heads a unit, “Group 13”, that is part of GUR, Ukraine’s military intelligence agency.

The reason that Thirteenth is so careful with his personal security is that he, accompanied by a small team of maritime experts, created the very first unmanned sea drones which have, in turn, effectively neutralised Russia’s famous Black Sea fleet.

Thirteenth claimed his unit has sunk nine Russian ships and large boats, and hit and damaged six more. It means, along with strikes using more conventional weapons, at least a third of the enemy’s fleet has been destroyed or disabled. “It is a very good result: every day Russia spends a lot of money to keep its remaining fleet but it cannot carry out any missions,” he said.

The David versus Goliath battle on the high seas has taken place as part of the brutal all-out war that began with the invasion of Ukraine by its more powerful neighbour on February 24, 2022.

The unexpected victory at sea for “David” (Ukraine) means that “Goliath” (Russia) has, much to its shame, had to hide away what remains of its once-formidable navy in the port of Sevastopol, Crimea, the region it illegally seized from Ukraine in 2014.

The success of the new technology has enabled sea drones costing only tens of thousands of pounds to sink warships that cost tens of millions of pounds. “The sea drones are expensive, but their effectiveness makes them seem very cheap,” Thirteenth told me.

AT THE start of the war, neither Ukraine nor Russia had even the most basic sea drones in their respective armouries. Or, as Thirteenth put it: “Back then, the technology of sea drones was zero. It simply did not exist. There was no text book to consult.”

From early in the war, both sides realised the potential of aerial drones as key weapons on the battlefield. But it soon became clear that they were not able to target enemy ships – they were too visible and, by carrying a heavy explosive, they became too slow and had a limited range. In short, even if they could reach close to their target, they were easy to shoot down.

Furthermore, Ukraine did not have any warships to combat the might of the Russian navy. Within days of the all-out war starting, Ukraine had taken the difficult decision to scuttle its one and only warship, Hetman Sahaidachny, near Mykolaiv because, as Russian forces advanced, it looked likely to fall into enemy hands.

Ukraine’s Armed Forces recognised that a



Why ‘Thirteen’ is an unlucky number for Ukraine’s invaders

Lord Ashcroft meets the secretive genius behind the embattled country’s state-of-the-art ‘sea drones’ that have decimated Russia’s Black Sea fleet and humiliated Vladimir Putin

new weapon was required to target enemy ships. Speaking in his native Ukrainian, Thirteenth told me: “We worked back from the end to the beginning. In other words, we knew our targets and we knew what level of explosives were needed to sink them.”

“Then we had to find a way to enable an explosive charge of 250 kilograms [550 lbs] to reach its target: that was our task.” Initially, Thirteenth was just one of a three-strong team, but this was later expanded. The first devices were the result of close co-operation between the military and civilian engineers.

They needed an unmanned, surface craft that was big enough to carry a large explosive at speed, but small enough to avoid detection by radar and the naked eye. The solution was...the sea drone. The early tri-

als of the new weapon were carried out at secret locations in Ukraine, with the earliest models quickly adapted and fine-tuned.

Some tests were conducted on freshwater lakes but it was soon realised that, if the drones were to be used at sea, then the trials need to be at sea too.

“Salt water and rougher waters present unique problems,” said Thirteenth.

Today the most sophisticated sea drone is about 5.5 meters (18ft) in length, carries an explosive head of 250 kilos, has a range of 500 nautical miles, is powered by a 300 horse power engine, has a plastic hull and has two cameras (main and reserve) with day and thermal vision. The drone has a cruising speed of 25 mph and an “attack speed” of 50 mph. In theory, sea drones can

be controlled by a “pilot” from anywhere in the world that has an internet link. In reality, they are manoeuvred – using live images from their cameras – from secret command centres in Ukraine.

“All that is required is two monitors and a lot of buttons,” said Thirteenth with a wry chuckle.

Ukraine declines to say exactly how much its most sophisticated sea drones, such as the Magura V5, cost, but defence experts put their value at around £200,000 per weapon.

The sea drones are most effective when used in swarms that can vary in number from just three to up to two dozen depending on the nature of the target and conditions at sea. They tend to be spread out in the open sea after being launched from land or sea, but they are then positioned closer together as they approach their target.

The essential advantage of sea drones over ships is they are cheaper and easier to manoeuvre as well as being harder to detect

by the enemy. Not all sea drone attacks are successful but, even when they are destroyed by Russian firepower, no Ukrainian servicemen are killed.

THE first success for Thirteenth and his team came on May 24, 2023, when sea drones successfully attacked the Russian intelligence-gathering ship, Ivan Khurs, in good weather and calm waters in the Black Sea. The ship’s hull and other equipment were damaged but it did not sink. Thirteenth said of the incident: “We felt this was the start of our work not the end of it. We caused some damage but I was disappointed because we did not achieve our aim of sinking the ship.”

That changed on November 10, 2023, when sea drones attacked and sunk two landing ships at anchor off Chornomorske,

Crimea. “On this mission, we had some time to make a plan. The targets were static and the Russians did not expect us to be so bold.”

“It was at night time and the weather was very bad – very low visibility – and the seas were rough. This was good for us because the Russian patrolling jets and helicopters could not detect us. We only used four sea drones and two hit their targets.”

“We knew straight away that we had hit the ships and we were very happy. The next day we learnt from our intelligence that the ships had been completely destroyed. It was the first time in the war that a Russian ship, in fact two ships, had been sunk by sea drones.”

Conventional weapons have also been used effectively against the Russian navy. As early as April 14, 2022, the

Russian warship Moskva, the flagship of the enemy’s navy, was sunk after being hit by two Neptune missiles.

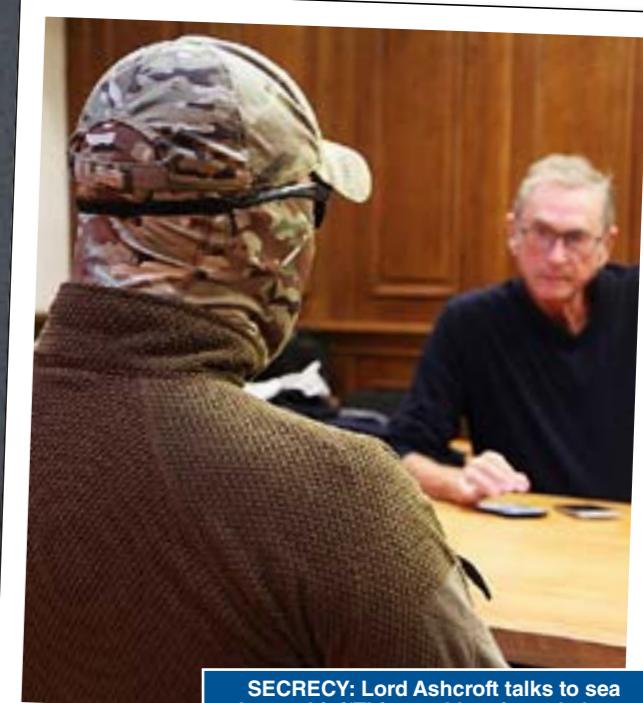
Russia claimed that 396 crew had been evacuated with one sailor killed and 27 missing. However, other unverified accounts suggested scores of sailors had perished.

Today, according to Thirteenth, the cat-and-mouse game of technological warfare continues.

Russia is trying to find ways to combat the sea drones and make them ineffective, while Ukraine is trying to improve its new weapons, including increasing their range so they can be launched further away from their targets.

“We have achieved a lot for our country but this is a game that does not have an end,” said Thirteenth. “The

Pictures: LORD ASHCROFT



SECRECY: Lord Ashcroft talks to sea drone chief, ‘Thirteenth’, main and above; successful strike on Russian ship, below



DEADLY: Model of a Magura V5 sea drone, estimated to cost around £200,000 each

war continues and our work continues. Every Russian military unit is a legitimate target and we want to find ways to strike them.

“We want to find ways to control not just the Black Sea but the skies above the sea too. We want to find a way to paralyse the enemy’s aircraft and all of its missiles.”

Thirteenth also appealed to the West for more help in its war with Russia. “My main message to the world is that we are keeping up the fight. We are not simply waiting for more help from the West.”

“We make the best of our resources and we are always looking for ways to improve our war effort against a big and strong enemy. But the world needs to understand that Russia is not just a problem for Ukraine: it is a danger to the entire civilised world.”

At the end of our interview, Thirteenth presented me with a model of a Magura V5 sea drone. Finally, intrigued by his nickname, I asked its origin.

“For various reasons, 13 has always been my lucky number,” he replied. “It has served me well in happy moments but for Russia it has been an unlucky number.”

● Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC is an international businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. For more information on his work, visit lordashcroft.com. Follow him on X/Facebook @LordAshcroft

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