

Lt D T Wickham RN



The grave of David Wickham stands among all the other stones in Bathford churchyard; it is a war grave of the standard pattern, with a fouled anchor crest denoting it to be a Royal Navy memorial. The inscription reads: 'Lieutenant D T Wickham. RN H.M.M.T.B. 695 7th March 1944 Age 27'; and at the bottom of the stone is a further inscription, which stimulated an interest for further research:

'Killed in Gallant and Successful Action off the Dutch Coast'.

This small epitaph inscribed in the stone told that he had been killed in action during a naval engagement on the 7th march 1944 in His Majesty's Motor Torpedo Boat 695, off the coast of Holland. Having spent many hours over the past fourteen years searching the archives at the Public Record Office at Kew London for details relating to other naval history, I was fairly certain that some form of original action report, or report of proceedings, on this particular engagement could be found. From which, the circumstances leading to the dire misfortune of this young man might also be found.

A visit to the PRO brought forth an account of gallantly and of suffering; told only from the one side of the conflict; though it would appear from the records that an even greater proportion of suffering may have been inflicted aboard the ships and vessels of the enemy at the time. The following has been taken mainly from the action reports from two of the Motor Torpedo Boats involved in the action (MTB 693 & 689), written just the day after the action by the various Commanding Officers of the MTB's; though there was no report from MTB 695 because its captain had been hospitalised. The reports were found enclosed along with the commendations for bravery awards to 19 officers and men of the 53rd MTB Flotilla for the action, and record the actions of individual MTB's on the night of the 6/7th March 1944, along with perceptions of events during the action; which also included the actions and misfortune of MTB 695. Further details have been gleaned from the 'Coastal Forces Log' for that date.

Abbreviations and naval terms found in the following text:

MTB	Motor Torpedo Boat
E-boat	German Motor Torpedo Boat
R-boat	MMS - German Motor Mine Sweeper, or Räumboot (Ger.)
Trawler	Ex-fishing trawlers, or Vorpostenboote (Ger); fitted with guns and depth charges and used for patrolling, and for A/A & A/S protection of minesweepers and coastal/inshore shipping.
Flotilla	A Unit or Group of small fighting ships or boats
SO	Senior Officer
CO	Commanding Officer; the Officer in Command of a ship or boat; this was normally the rank of a senior Lieutenant on small ships (<i>destroyers and smaller vessels</i>); often referred to in the RN as the ' <i>Captain</i> ' of the ship or vessel, though not Captain by rank
Lt Cdr	Lieutenant Commander
Lt	Lieutenant
(N)	Denotes a Navigator
(G)	Denotes a Gunner
RN	Royal Navy
RNVR	Royal Navy Voluntary Reserve. Retired RN officers and men retained on a reserve list, who could be recalled to active service in times of hostilities for the duration only
Port	To the left
Starboard	To the right
Bow	Foremost extreme of a vessel. ('.. <i>on the port bow at about 3-4 miles distance</i> ' <i>i.e. - at an approximate distance of 3-4 miles, viewed an angle to the left of straight forward</i>)
Stern	Rear extreme of a vessel
Knots	Nautical miles
Station	Position relative to another vessel (keeping at a relative speed and at a fixed distance from another vessel, as in keeping <i>formation</i> in the RAF)
Division	A section of a larger unit (<i>to split into divisions</i>)
6pdr	6-pounder gun, firing a shell of six-imperial pounds in weight
Pom Pom	2-pounder heavy automatic gun, normally two or more barrels (<i>probably two on an MTB</i>)
Oerlikon	20mm highly accurate automatic gun
Star shell	A shell that is not normally intended to cause damage; but fired over the top of the target, whereby a time fuse detonates a small internal charge to eject a small parachute flare from the rear of the shell, which then floats down to illuminate the

enemy's position at night. Small calibre rounds were in the form of very bright tracer rounds, whereby each shell issued a bright incendiary flare from its rear end as it travelled towards, or over, the target.

A/A	Anti-Aircraft
A/S	Anti-Submarine
Morse code	Now discontinued method of signalling, which used a series of dots and dashes instead of letters, conveyed either by wireless transmission, wired telegraph or by signal lamp
ENE	East, by North-East (<i>a bearing of between North-East and directly East</i>)
SSW	South, by South-West (<i>a bearing of between directly South and South-West</i>)
Ty	Temporary
DSO	Distinguished Service Order
DSC	Distinguished Service Cross
DSM	Distinguished Service Medal
MID	Mentioned In Dispatches

The Public Record Office, Kew, London

National Archives references relevant to the following account:

ADM 1/29516 Awards to 19 officers and men of HM MTBs 689, 690, 693, 694 and 695 for attack on enemy shipping in Ymuiden Harbour Mar 6/7 1944

ADM 199/2416 Coastal Forces Log 1943 Oct - 1944 Apr

Internet access: www.pro.gov.uk

Enquiries Tel: 0181 8763444

The action of the 53rd MTB Flotilla off the Dutch coast 6/7th March 1944

The 53rd Motor Torpedo Boat Flotilla consisted of five 'D' Class boats, and for the night of the 6 /7th March 1944 these were divided into two divisions. The code name for this, and a series of similar sorties off the Dutch coast by the MTB's during 1944 was Operation 'Bangor'.

'Division I' consisting of MTB 693 (Lieutenant Commander D H E McGowen RNVR Senior Officer of the flotilla), 695 and 689; these three boats had no torpedo tubes fitted, but were more heavily armed with guns than those that were fitted with torpedo tubes. 'Division II' were MTB 694 and 690, both had torpedo tubes fitted, but fewer defensive weapons.

The five boats sailed from Lowestoft at 17.30 on evening of the 6th March, with orders to make an 'Offensive sweep off the Dutch Coast'. This was the first offensive sweep to be carried out by boats of the 53rd MTB Flotilla, and the orders were basically to attack or harass any enemy convoy or shipping to be found. German E-boats had been carrying out similar activities against British & Allied shipping around the English coast since early in the war.

The flotilla arrived at their initial position in the English Channel (52° 40'N, 4° 32'E) at 23.02; the moon was bright and visibility was extreme in all directions, the wind was ENE. force 3. The flotilla turned southwest to sweep down the convoy route at 10 knots.

MTB 693 led the way, with 695 and 689 on either side in V formation, whilst MTB 694 and 690 (Division II) were stationed separately to port.

At thirty-seven minutes past midnight, three enemy trawlers were sighted on the port bow at about 3-4 miles distance, and shortly afterwards the enemy challenged by signal lamp with a Morse code letter 'P'; this was to check if they were friend or foe. The flotilla turned away towards the northeast without answering, in order to gain a more favourable position relative to the moon in preparation for attack. Owing to the extreme visibility, Lt Cdr McGowen assessed that in order to achieve surprise he would need to sweep in close into the shore and attack from the vicinity of Ymuiden (*IJmuiden*) and make the initial approach towards the trawlers from landward, thereby hoping the enemy would think them to be German E-boats leaving the harbour. Course was altered to the south east at thirty-two minutes past midnight.

Lt Cdr McGowen detached Division II (694 & 690) to sweep seaward and attack separately with torpedoes, while Division I (293, 295 & 298) proceeded further inshore with the intension of attacking the ships inshore with gunfire. Division I altered course at 01.08 to the south, and almost immediately sighted a gun coaster dead ahead at a radar range of 1900yds, plus eight or nine R-boats (*German Mine Sweepers*) to seaward, and to the port side (*inshore*) there were four trawlers, which were perceived to be probably at anchor. Just at this moment, MTB 689 suffered a broken oil union in the engine room and dropped back while repairs were made. Ymuiden pier was 235° at 7,400yds distance at 03.05, and several ships were observed bearing SSW. As MTB 689 was catching up the other two boats, a few light craft were observed leaving harbour; these were later considered to have been a slight advantage to the MTB's by causing confusion to the proceedings on the enemy's part.

The gun coaster made a challenge with the Morse letter 'P', and a reply 'P' was given from MTB 693, followed by an imaginary E-boat call sign of S-B-X and a few letters of no particular meaning in bad Morse code, and on a badly trained lamp. By which time, the MTB's were down to 200yds from the enemy ships and passing between them and Ymuiden Harbour entrance, which was about 500yds distance. Lt Cdr McGowen then altered course to port and ' . . . to cross the T of the enemy unit'. This was to cut straight across in front of the lead ship of the line, whereby guns fore and aft could bear on the gun coaster, but the enemy, being in line astern would find it difficult to fire without sweeping their own ships, and even the lead gun coaster would only be at advantage with its forward facing guns.

At 01.17, MTB's 693 and 695 opened fire on the gun coaster, while 698 was not close enough to attack the gun coaster, fired a burst of star-shell at the second ship of the line and identified it as an R-boat. It took around fifteen seconds of firing by the MTB's before the enemy opened up with heavy and sometimes accurate fire, but it was mostly wild and coming from all directions, with the exception of the gun coaster which had been hit heavily by the initial bursts of fire from 693 and 695. On crossing the enemy's bow, the MTB's turned to starboard down the enemy line and came under from the trawlers on their port side as well as the R-boat astern of the gun coaster, the fire being mainly directed at 695 and 689.

MTB 695 was heavily hit on the bridge; the Navigating Officer, Sub. Lieutenant John William Gordon Morrish RNVR, and Lieutenant D T Wickham RN, Gunnery Officer on the Staff of Captain Coastal Forces, The Nore, were both killed. The Commanding Officer, Temporary Lieutenant Douglas Wallace MacFarlane RNVR was severely

wounded, the Petty Officer/Coxswain who was at the wheel and the First Lieutenant were also wounded. MTB 695 became temporarily out of control and rammed MTB 693 in the stern, though luckily, no serious damage was sustained, and smoke was immediately ordered to conceal 695 from further gunfire as the boat was brought back under control.

MTB 689 following, opened fire with all starboard-bearing guns at the R-boat and effectively silenced it, after which it was seen to burn fiercely from end to end.

The gun coaster was also ablaze and was settling into the water by the stern; this was observed from MTB 689 and also by the pom-pom gunner in 693, who later reported that during the later stages of the action he'd had only the bows of the vessel to aim at. At 01.21, with the MTB's were being fired at by trawlers, R-boats and shore batteries, and when both the pom-pom and an Oerlikon gun on MTB 689 had stoppages and would not fire, smoke was released and she zig-zagged out of the action at high speed. At around this time a heavy explosion was heard from the direction of the harbour, later assessed as a torpedo exploding from either MTB 694 or 690. MTB 693 further engaged the trawlers on the port side, before Lt Cdr McGowen disengaging the flotilla and turned towards the southwest at a speed of 25 knots whilst the enemy carried on firing at each other. A few minutes later several bursts of vertical tracer fire were observed indicating distress, these were followed by two large explosions, which were probably the gun coaster or an R-boat blowing up.

MTB 689 regained station with 693 and 695 at 01.24, and at 02.30 MTB 694 and 690 rejoined. MTB 695 signalled to the SO (MTB 693) that he was returning to base independently with casualties, but as 693 and 694 both had one engine out of action, the SO decided that the flotilla would return to Lowestoft.

Whilst MTB 693, 695 and 689 had been in action inshore, Division II (694 & 690) had headed seaward of the harbour, and at 01.10 had sighted two motor-vessels and five R-boats all stopped and lying 3000yds from the entrance to Ymuiden Harbour. At 01.17, MTB 694 closed to within 800yds and fired two torpedoes at a small coaster of about 600tons, but although the torpedoes ran, no hits were seen or heard and 694 disengaged under heavy erratic fire from the enemy. At the same time, MTB 690 had closed a small freighter of about 2000 tons to within 800yds and fired two torpedoes, both were observed to run. Enemy fire came from all direction and fire was returned from 6pdr and Oerlikon's, and hits were observed. Immediately after this, one torpedo was seen to hit the freighter under the bridge and the ship caught fire and began to settle by the bows. At 01.20 MTB 690 ceased firing and disengaged, as the freighter was enveloped in smoke and flames. Shore batteries opened fire, with guns, shrapnel-rockets and starshell, at about 1000yds range. At 01.30, a salvo of large calibre shells burst very close to MTB 694 which holed the engine room, set the starboard after-engine on fire and wounded a stoker. The fire was promptly extinguished and shelling ceased as the two MTB's proceeded to make there rendezvous with the rest of the flotilla.

Lieutenant MacFarlane of MTB 695, although seriously wounded did not leave the bridge and refused medical attention until the other wounded members of his crew were attended to. First Lieutenant J B Horwood, also wounded but to a lesser degree, remained at his post, attended the wounded and navigated the boat back to harbour. The Commanding Officer, Lieutenant MacFarlane, although seriously wounded remained on the bridge until he brought the boat alongside some five-hours later.

The casualties sustained during the action were:

Killed:

Lieut. DT Wickham RN (Staff of CCF Nore) MTB 695
Sub Lieut. John William Gordon Morrish RNVR MTB 695

Wounded:

Temp. Lieut. Douglas Wallace MacFarlane RNVR (*seriously*) MTB 695
Temp. Lieut. John Brooks Herwood RNVR (*slight*) MTB 695
Cyril Frank Curtis Ordinary Seaman (A.AA30) C/JX545738 (*dangerous*) MTB 695
Sydney Joe Mears P.O. Cox'n P/JX128025 (*slight*) MTB 695
Christopher Robinson Stoker 2 D/KX525242 (*slight*) MTB 694

A total of 19 awards were awarded to officers and men of the 53rd flotilla for this action, these were:

MTB 693 (SO)	1x DSO,	1x DSM,	2x MID
MTB 695	1x DSC,	2x DSM,	2x MID
MTB 689	1x DSM,	3x MID	
MTB 694	3x MID		
MTB 690	1x DSC,	2x DSM	

Awards to MTB 695:

DSC The Commanding Officer, Temp. Lieut. DLW Macfarlane RNVR
DSM The Coxswain, Petty Officer Sidney Joe Mears P/MX. 128025
DSM Acting Leading Seaman Ernest Leah D/JX. 202862
MID Temp. Lieut. John Brooks Horwood RNVR
MID Ordinary Seaman Walter Fletcher D/JX. 364146

The following extracts have been taken from a later analytical report on the action made out by the Commanding Officer, H.M.S. Mantis, Lowestoft:

'The audacity of the plan of attack appears to have thrown both the enemy ships and shore batteries into complete confusion causing them to inflict considerable damage on each other apart from the severe handling they received from the M.T.B.'s.'

'Pom Pom starshell was not fired as an illuminant, owing to extreme visibility but was observed to burst on impact, and was responsible for starting fires in the gun coaster and R-boat. It must have had a considerable blinding effect on personnel of those boats.'

'The enemy opened fire from shore with extreme accuracy with heavy calibre guns and shrapnel rockets, up to a range of 5 miles. In particular, the placing of the shrapnel rockets was unpleasantly close.'

'Smoke was used very effectively by MTB's 695 and 689 when retiring from action, both boats suffered from the common complaint of being unable to cease smoke. The present bridge control for C.S.A. gear is only effective for turning on the apparatus. An additional unit or modification to the present Unit is required, so that smoke can be rapidly turned off from the bridge.'

'Once again a fatal casualty has been caused owing to the none-existence of armour plating around the charthouse. It is stressed that it is an urgent requirement to fit all chart houses of D class M.T.B.'s with non-magnetic armour plating.'

'Actually during this operation R/T was not used until after the action. It is considered that R/T silence assisted the Unit in being undetected by the enemy.'

'Loud hailer was used for manoeuvring and passing enemy information.'

The following has been taken from the Diary of Coastal Forces:

Damage to boats

MTB 695	repairs completed in approx. 1 week
MTB 395	- - - approx. 3 weeks
MTB 689,690 & 694	- - - 24 hours

Claims

- 1 Motor Vessel of 2000tons probably sunk by torpedoes
- 1 Gun Coaster probably sunk by gun fire
- 1 Trawler damaged
- 1 R Boat set on fire

Damage caused to other trawlers and R Boats but cannot be assessed

-:-

David Wickham entered the Royal Navy as a Cadet in January 1934 and became a Midshipman in the cruiser HMS Sussex the following year, serving in her until 1937. He became a Sub-Lieutenant at the shore training base HMS Vernon in 1937 and joined the cruiser HMS Exeter, attaining rank of full Lieutenant (N). He served in Exeter until 1940 and was then transferred to the destroyer HMS Harvester until 1941. On completing a gunnery course at the gunnery school HMS Excellent at Portsmouth in mid 1941, he joined the destroyer HMS Mackay in 1942 as Lieutenant (G) and remained with this ship until the end of 1943. He was then appointed to the Coastal Forces base at HMS Pembroke where he was Lieutenant (G), Gunnery Officer for the Duty Captain Coastal Forces.

The reason why he went out on the night of the 6/7th March 1944 has not been found, as although he was a Gunnery Officer, he was not MTB 695's gunnery officer. It may have been that he had gone out to observe the gunnery tactics, as this was the first offensive sortie of the Flotilla.

His father, Captain T Wickham OBE died in 1973, and is buried in Bathford churchyard; he was already serving in the Royal Navy in 1934 when David joined.



Bathford church and churchyard

RAES 11/03/05

APPENDIX to Lt D T Wickham RN

Recommendations and awards for gallantry awarded to MTB 695:

Name: Douglas Leonard Wallace MacFarlane
Home Town: London
Rank or Rating: Temporary Lieutenant RNVR
Port Division & Official Number:

For outstanding skill, gallantry and undaunted devotion to duty in action against the enemy. During the action M.T.B. 695 was heavily hit, all bridge personnel being killed or wounded. Lieutenant MacFarlane remained on the bridge until he brought his boat alongside some five hours later and refused medical aid until the other wounded members of his crew received attention. He then collapsed from great pain and loss of blood. His fortitude was a splendid example to all.

Recommended: Decoration *Received:* DSO

Name: John Brooks Horwood
Home Town: Brighton, South Australia
Rank or Rating: Temporary Lieutenant RNVR
Port Division & Official Number:

For outstanding skill, courage and devotion to duty in action against superior enemy forces as First Lieutenant of M.G.B. 695. Although wounded when enemy fire swept the bridge and seriously wounded the Commanding Officer, killed the Navigating Officer and wounded the Coxwain, he remained at his post, attended to the wounded, and navigated his ship back to harbour.

Recommended: Mention in Despatches *Received:* MID

Name: Sidney Joe Mears
Home Town: Portsmouth
Rank or Rating: Petty Officer (Ty)
Port Division & Official Number: P/MX 128025

This rating although severely wounded remained at the wheel until his boat was successfully withdrawn from the action. His coolness, cheerfulness and devotion to duty were a splendid example to all.

Recommended: Decoration *Received:* DSM

Name: Ernest Leah
Home Town: Waterfoot
Rank or Rating: Acting Leading Seaman

Port Division & Official Number: D/JX 202862

Oerlikon Gunner. This rating displayed skill, coolness and gallantry in action against the enemy. He fought his gun with great determination and accuracy and caused considerable damage to trawlers and R-boats.

Recommended: Decoration *Received:* DSM

Continued:

Name: Walter Fletcher
Home Town: Lees, Nr, Oldham
Rank or Rating: Ordinary Seaman A.A,III
Port Division & Official Number: D/JX 364146

Pom Pom Gunner. This rating displayed great skill, coolness and gallantry in action against the enemy. He fought his gun with determination and accuracy and displayed considerable initiative in shifting his fire to other targets after the Gunnery Control Officer had been wounded.

Recommended: Mention in Despatches *Received:* MID

Note:

Page 3 'The flotilla arrived at their initial position in the English Channel (52° 40'N, 4° 32'E)'

This is roughly the point where lines would cross if drawn vertical from The Hague, and parallel from Amsterdam, which is a point just off the Dutch Coast. The MTB's had then sailed from this point South West, and then turned away from the trawlers towards East North-East and the coast; taking them also near to the entrance Ymuiden (*IJmuiden*) Harbour.

Compiled and written by Robert Scammell

RAES 11/03/2005

