

The Live Bait Squadron Bulletin



Bulletin-18

Christmas 2021

INTRODUCTION, BY YOUR VIRTUAL CHAIRMAN

Dear all,

This Bulletin-18 is dated 24th December 2021, Christmas Eve. Last September I wrote '*At this time it seems the hardest (covid)times have passed*'. This proves to have been wishful thinking. At this moment here in the Netherlands we again find us in a lockdown, just like Christmas last year. I do not think your UK is much better off.

So, this again will be a 'cosy' Christmas. Nevertheless: my very best wishes to you all, and keep safe!

The next Bulletin-19 is scheduled 22 September 2022. If before that date something urgent pops up, I will let you know.

Henk H.M. van der Linden
Chairman



a 1914 wishing card

Our big disaster, but here is a story with a happy end

In *Bulletin-120*, August 2021, of the *Western Front Association* I met with this remarkable story. Of course I was familiar with it, Kit Wykeham Musgrave figures in my book too, but this article is very special. The author, Richard Purshouse, quotes from a local paper, the *Warwick Advertiser*, 25 September 1914. Thank you, Mr Purshouse, for this great digging, and thank you, *Western Front Association* for sharing it!

Torpedoed three times in one morning!

by Richard Purshouse



There was probably no luckier seaman in the Great War than Midshipman Wenham Humphrey 'Kit' Wykeham-Musgrave, the only Royal Naval officer to survive being torpedoed three times on three ships... in the same morning.

Wykeham-Musgrave, from Barford, in Warwickshire, had his miracle escape on 22 September 1914, when he was only 15 years old. The Midshipman was on HMS *Aboukir* when it was torpedoed, then HMS *Hogue* and HMS *Cressy* – all hit by the German U boat *U-9* off the Dutch coast.

Kit was always destined for a life at sea, being educated at Isle of Wight and Dartmouth Royal Naval Colleges, having left Dartmouth barely seven weeks earlier to join the *Aboukir*. His incredible story was revealed in his local paper, *The Advertiser*, on 25 September 1914, which reported:

“Midshipman Wykeham-Musgrave, who had no time to dress, slid down one side of HMS *Aboukir* while she was foundering, and as there was not very extensive suction, he was able to get clear in a few minutes by swimming as strongly as he was able.

“Many others did the same, but he knows of large number who perished. One was unable to swim. When disaster wrecked the *Aboukir*, the *Hogue* and the *Cressy* drew near to render what assistance they could, and their boats were let down to pick up survivors.

“Midshipman Wykeham-Musgrave swam to the *Hogue* – seeing as he went the frightful sight of drowning and struggling men all around him – and he had just been taken on board and was supposing that he was safe, when the *Hogue* was struck – not once but twice. She went to the bottom even quicker than the *Aboukir*.

“She sank, indeed, within three or four minutes, and so Midshipman Wykeham-Musgrave and others of the crew of the *Aboukir* were once more forced to slide into the sea and swim for life. Many of the 800 men of the *Hogue* joined them, and others grasped floating wreckage, but a large number perished like their friends of the *Aboukir*.

“Midshipman Wykeham-Musgrave, who must have kept his presence of mind in a wonderful way, swam on and on until he reached the *Cressy*. He was pulled up by ropes to the deck of the ship, but he had not long been hauled to what appeared to be safety before the *Cressy* herself received the first of two charges that sank her.

“She did not go down so rapidly as the *Aboukir* and the *Hogue* – indeed Midshipman Wykeham-Musgrave thinks that if she had not been torpedoed a second time she might not have foundered at all. But the second attack left no room for doubt about her fate, and she sank in about 25 minutes – or about an hour after the assault on the *Aboukir*.”

A plank of wood saved the boy's life, thrown from another ship (a storm a few days' earlier had damaged most of the escape boats). *The Advertiser* explained: “While he was on the *Cressy*, Midshipman Wykeham-Musgrave distinctly saw a submarine about 200 yards away, and he says that the *Cressy*'s gunners fired upon it. The aim was good and it was ought that this craft might have been sunk, but no one was quite sure.

“Indeed, in time of such destruction, excitement and danger, it was difficult to be quite sure of anything. But the cool, calm cadet made sure of one thing. That he held on to a short plank, which he obtained before the *Cressy* went beneath the waves. And it was to this small

piece of wood that he clung when, for the third time, he was forced to take to the sea in a last attempt to save himself.

“Another sailor also grasped the wood, and so saved himself. Midshipman Wykeham-Musgrave clung to the little plank with the desperation and determination that every reader can imagine, hoping that he would be able to keep afloat until he was picked up by one of the boats which were engaged in rescuing as many of the crews as they could accommodate. “But his fierce struggle and exposure in the heavy sea for between two and three hours were naturally fast overcoming his strength: so much so, in fact, that he was only pulled out of the water in the nick of time.

“He was unconscious when he was rescued, for he has no recollection of the fact that he was saved by someone on the Dutch vessel, the *Titan*. When he did come to, he found that he was one of the 200 or 300 seaman who were crowded on this vessel. And he found out too, that when he was pulled out of the sea he was not wearing a single garment!

“The crew of the *Titan* behaved most kindly to him and the other survivors of the disaster, providing such food, comforts, and clothes they could find. Eventually the cadet was put on a British destroyer which took him to Harwich on Tuesday night.

“Midshipman Wykeham-Musgrave is firmly of the opinion that at least five German submarines took part in the attack on the three cruisers. He thinks that a fishing smack, which was flying the Dutch flag, was in league with them, for she signalled with flags and would not rescue any of the men who were struggling in the sea after the cruisers sank. “We are glad to hear that the cadet is apparently little the worse for the experiences and shock that suffered on that awful morning. We congratulate him and his parents most warmly on the fact that he was saved from so much peril – saved for what we hope may be a long and distinguished career in the service of his country”.

Kit was praised by fellow survivors for his coolness. One told the British press: “The best thing I saw was the coolness of a little cadet. Not more than 14 he looked. He drifted near me, he and a seaman clinging with their hands and elbows on the same bit of wood. I’ve never seen anything as calm as that lad. He was talking to the seaman with him. ‘Well,’ he says, ‘we’ve got to carry on like this, and if we die, we shall die game’. Only 14, a little light-haired boy. I hope he was saved.”

In October, 1914, the *New York World* newspaper tracked down the officer whose submarine torpedoed the three British ships. Kapitänleutnant Otto Weddigen confirmed only one U-boat was involved in the attack. His account was reprinted in a British paper, the *Globe*. It reported: “The officer gives striking support to the criticisms published by the Admiralty after the disaster, pointing out that after the torpedoing of the *Aboukir* ‘the English were playing my game, for I had scarcely to move out of my position, which helped to keep me from detection’. He was referring, of course to the advance of the *Hogue* and *Cressy* to the assistance of their crippled other ship.

“Since our own officers and men have paid full tribute to the daring of the German submarine, it is interesting to observe that Weddigen is no less honest in the praise of our men.

“Such testimony from such a source is not without its value, and serves once more to emphasise the difference between the German seaman and soldier.”

The Admiralty was so appalled at the disaster it issued a communique declaring that if circumstances were to happen again, the sailors were not to be rescued. The complete lists of the survivors of the North Sea action, in which the cruisers *Aboukir*, *Cressy* and *Hogue* were lost, were issued officially on 25 September.

The totals may be tabulated thus:

	Officers.	Men.	Total.
Aboukir	17	235	252
Cressy	14	188	202
Hogue	29	354	383
Aggregate			837

Each cruiser would have had a complement of at least 700, but there is reason to believe that, including cadets, the three vessels had altogether slightly over 2,200 on board, so that the lost and missing must total not less than 1,360.

The boy sailor was not only saved, but went to serve on the HMS *Vanguard* (he survived her accidental explosion only because he was on sick leave), and HMS *Inflexible*. He returned to active service in 1944 and became a Commander. The near-death experience clearly did Kit little lasting damage. He lived to a ripe old age, dying in 1989, aged 90.



HMS *Aboukir*