



## History and Heritage Series

### **Captain George Edward Hunt DSO\*, DSC\* RN** (4 Jul 1916 – 16 Aug 2011)

#### **Our most highly-decorated Member**

Sources include various websites, esp that of Submariner's Association of Australia Inc. Our thanks go to SAA and to Mr Peter Dornan AM for permission to use their references in this article.



These Background Notes have been prepared as 'bite-sized' light reading for our Members. The intention is to broaden understanding of selected aspects of the Club's rich history and heritage, and the remarkable people who have contributed to its development over the years. They are based primarily on a number of websites, with specific additional information in places. We acknowledge that there are probably errors and omissions. Please contact the Club if you have additional information or comments that will assist to improve these notes.

We thank the History Interest Group and other volunteers who have researched and prepared these Notes. The series will be progressively expanded and developed over time. They are intended as casual reading, for private use by Members only, and as they lack the rigor, attributions and acknowledgements required to be suitable for academic or public use, Members are requested not to reproduce or distribute them outside of our membership.

# Captain George Edward Hunt DSO\*, DSC\* RN

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### Introduction

Captain George Edward Hunt was the most highly-decorated member of the United Service Club. He was awarded a DSC and Bar, and a DSO and Bar, as well as being twice mentioned in despatches, making him one of Britain's most highly-decorated naval officers.

He sank more enemy ships than any other British submariner of the Second World War<sup>1</sup>, commanding patrols that were considered of *unsurpassed daring and brilliance*. His successes were based on a *technical mastery that was allied to steely courage*.

George Edward Hunt was born on 4 July 1916 at Milton of Campsie, north of Glasgow, where his grandfather had founded a calico printing works. His father was a colonial officer in Africa and George was a child of Empire. Sent back home at the age of seven, he recalled that on the solo train journey from Tilbury a luggage label on his coat read simply: *Moffat, Scotland*. He never saw his father again. He was educated at St Ninian's and cared for on his holidays by two doting aunts.

George left school at 13 to join the Merchant Navy training ship Conway in the Mersey, and at 16 he joined the Glasgow-based Henderson Line, which sailed on routes to India and Burma; his first ship as deck cadet was the 5,000-ton passenger-cargo ship *Arracan*. In 1930 he was commissioned as a Midshipman RNR.

In 1938 he was commissioned into the Royal Navy, volunteered for the submarine service. By 1939 he was already serving in submarines. During World War II he was sunk once, rammed twice, and had hundreds of depth charges dropped around him.

His fifteenth mission was described by the Admiralty as *unsurpassed in the Annals of the Mediterranean Submarine Flotilla*.

### Royal Navy War Service Overview

After joining the Royal Navy, Hunt spent a short time in the destroyer *Foxhound* before volunteering for submarine service. On 1 January 1939 George began his initial submarine officer training at *HMS Dolphin*. During this time the trainees were required to go to sea on two of the L class submarines L26 and L27. He then joined *Unity* as the signals and navigation officer and was soon awarded his first DSC for gallant service on several successful patrols.

On the night of 29 April 1940 *Unity* was accidentally run down in fog by the Norwegian merchant ship *Alte Jarl*, which sliced into the forward section of the submarine<sup>2</sup>. All but two men escaped but after two others were swept away by the tide, Hunt helped keep the rest of the crew together until they were rescued. For this act of leadership he was mentioned in despatches.

Instead of survivor's leave Hunt was appointed, in May and June 1940, as liaison officer to the Dutch submarine *O10*, patrolling the North Sea and covering the evacuation from the beaches of Dunkirk. From July to December he undertook patrols in the North Sea and the Bay of Biscay as first-lieutenant of the submarine H31, and from December to March 1941 he was liaison officer of the Polish submarine *Sokol*.

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<sup>1</sup> As distinct from greatest tonnage sunk; David Wanklyn VC achieved sinkings of greater tonnage

<sup>2</sup> In March 1939, George, now a lieutenant was appointed to his first submarine *HMS Unity* based in Blyth as the Signals and Navigation Officer, unfortunately his time in *Unity* would not last for long. With the declaration of war against Germany and U-boat activity in the North Sea, *Unity* was sent north on the night of 29 April 1940 this was a very foggy night and unawares to the submariners in *Unity* they were sailing into an unknown southbound convoy. Out of the fog came the Norwegian merchant ship *Alte Jarl*, while trying to take evasion action the ship sliced through the fore-ward section of the submarine, the captain called for abandon ship, all but two submariners escaped and two drifted off by the tide. George managed to keep the men together until they were rescued by the *Alte Jarl*.

Hunt was then appointed first-lieutenant of the submarine *Proteus* which deployed to the Mediterranean where, on February 8 1942, *Proteus* made a night attack on what the captain thought was a U-boat, firing two torpedoes on the surface at 700 yards from her stern tubes but without result. As *Proteus* turned to fire her bow torpedoes the enemy ship, which turned out to be the Italian torpedo boat *Sagittario*, rammed *Proteus* in an attempt to sink her.

*Proteus* lost her port forward hydroplane and water began to pour into the torpedo room. As the crew scrambled to plug holes and drain the torpedo room, Hunt's leadership and experience proved crucial in saving the boat from sinking. *Proteus* was eventually able to proceed slowly at periscope depth back to her base. Hunt was awarded a Bar to his DSC<sup>3</sup>.

He passed the submarine commanding officers' course (*Perisher*<sup>4</sup>) in April 1942 and took command of *H33* and then of *H50*, working with destroyers practising their anti-submarine work.

With his well-groomed red beard, George was the epitome of a devoted naval officer.



In October 1942 he took command of the submarine with which he would forge his reputation. This was known as P53 before Churchill decreed that all submarines should have names instead of numbers after which she was named *Utor* (after Mars Utor, or Mars the Avenger).

While in command of *Utor*, he and his crew accounted for 28 enemy vessels (sinking 20 by torpedo and eight by gunfire) and damaging four more ships.

After a very cold and unsuccessful patrol off North Cape, Norway, *Utor* was sent to the Mediterranean in early 1943. There her fortunes changed entirely.

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<sup>3</sup> In April, George was made the First Lieutenant of *HMS Proteus* and reported to Portsmouth where the boat was in dry-dock undergoing repairs. *Proteus* was sent to join the Eight Flotilla based in Alexandria. The sixth patrol left Alexandria on 29 January to be taken off Cephalonia, while on the surface at night charging batteries a dark shape was seen in the distance which was assumed was a U-boat and a surface attack was undertaken with the CO on the bridge and George in the control room.

Unfortunately the torpedoes missed and the target turned and was bearing down on *Proteus*. The captain turned the submarine head on so as not to be sliced in two. The CO having ordered *Collision stations* with the impact of port forward hydroplane which ripped a long gash down the side of an Italian destroyer, then broke off, landing in the engine room of the destroyer. To compound the damage the starboard hydroplane fell off allowing water to pour into the torpedo room. Meanwhile, George's leadership and knowledge were working to save the boat from sinking once the holes could be plugged and the torpedo room was drained the CO ordered George to dive the boat and proceed at periscope depth back to Alexandria. This took a lot of skill for George using the aft hydroplanes

<sup>4</sup> The Submarine Command Course (SMCC), previously known as the Commanding Officers Qualifying Course (COQC), and informally known as *the Perisher* because of its low success rate, is a training course for naval officers preparing to take command of a submarine.

Hunt's first success came in April, when he fired on and sank the 2,150-ton German motor vessel *Penerf*<sup>5</sup>. This scalp was soon followed by those of an auxiliary minesweeper and a large merchantman, both Italian, before *Ultror* accounted for the 800-ton Italian destroyer *Lince* in August.

Other operations included a shore bombardment, landing Special Forces, and carrying manned torpedoes (known as *chariots*). In May 1944 Hunt was again mentioned in despatches during the Allied landings at Anzio, when *Ultror* was used as beacon to guide landing craft to their beaches.

### Greatest Feat

Perhaps Hunt's greatest feat came on June 27 1944 when he detected the 3,317-ton cargo ship *Cap Blanc* close to Cap Antibes. Despite her four escorts he managed to sink her with four torpedoes. He was hunted for an hour but eluded the depth charges. As he slowly drew away he spotted the 5,260-ton tanker *Pallas* under tow of two tugs with five more escorts and four aircraft circling overhead. Though conditions were good for an anti-submarine chase, Hunt succeeded in penetrating the strong escort screen and at 08.31 fired his last two torpedoes from 1,500 yards. Both hit. He dived to 300ft (near to maximum safe diving depth) to endure what he knew would be a heavy counter-attack. Hunt stopped counting the depth charges after the first 100 (!). The detonations started several leaks but none proved catastrophic and Hunt crept away until, at about noon, he came to periscope depth and saw his enemy hull down on the horizon<sup>6</sup>.

His senior officer wrote that while the first attack was *brilliant*, the second, mounted only three hours later, *was the most superlative exhibition... [achieving] an unseen, undetected position inside such a massive and violently zigzagging screen suggests consummate technical skill, but shows, moreover, determination and courage of the highest order.* (See the footnote below for a fuller extract).

Hunt, who was awarded a Bar to his existing DSO, modestly preferred to describe the presence of so many escorts as *very off-putting*.

By the end of the war he held the title of deadliest submarine captain. Of the 68 torpedoes he fired, 47 per cent were hits. While Lieutenant Commander David Wanklyn VC sank most tonnage, Hunt, who attributed his success to his *marvellous team on-board*, sank most ships.

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<sup>5</sup> *Ultror* was sent to the Mediterranean and the Eighth Flotilla based at Algiers. George was given his first patrol off the French Riviera; this was to be the first of 16 patrols in the Med. On the completion of the patrol, having sunk the German *MV Penerf* (2,150 tons) and attacking two others, one which sunk and the other sustaining damage, *Ultror* completed her patrol and returned to Algiers. *Penerf* was the first of *Ultror's* successful war career.

<sup>6</sup> One particular patrol stood out for George's seniors to take note. It was off the coast of Nice, having attacked a ship with success and avoiding the ship's escorts, *Ultror* moved away. After loading new torpedoes into the tubes a new convoy target was spotted off Cape Antibes; it was a tanker under tow with an escort of five ships and five aircraft above and to compound the difficult target, the four escorts from the previous sinking joined the convoy of the tanker making it nine escorts and five aircraft.

After sizing up the situation from afar, George decided to enter into the area between the escort screen and the tanker. Having been able to avoid detection *Ultror* was now in a position for George to make a torpedo attack at 1,500 yards. At 0831 he fired both torpedoes and went deep to 300 feet almost to the boat's maximum safe diving depth and within seconds of the torpedoes slamming into the tanker, depth-charges began to rain down causing damage to the boat including the stern glands which began to leak. After more than a hundred depth-charges over an hour the boat managed to creep away until the bombardment ceased.

A report by the Captain of Tenth Flotilla stated: *The attack on the 3,000 ton merchant ship was brilliantly carried out, but I have no hesitation in saying that, in my considerable experience of submarining, the attack on the tanker only three hours later is the most superlative exhibition I have heard. That Lieutenant Hunt should achieve an unseen undetected position at 1500 yards inside such a massive and violently zigzagging screen suggests consummate technical skill, but shows, moreover, determination and courage of the highest order...Lieutenant Hunt very seriously described the screen and their manoeuvres to me on his return as "very off-putting", a rather attractive understatement...A performance that will be difficult for his own or any other submarine rival.*

## Post War

At the end of the war Hunt took command of the T-class submarine, *Taku*, and following the conclusion of the conflict he was first-lieutenant of the aircraft carrier *Triumph*.

By 1947 he was again in command of a submarine (*Ambush*) on trials under the ice of the Arctic Ocean, an experience which he described as a *memorable and unnerving experience*. In 1948 Hunt commanded the *Perisher* course and was responsible for passing British officers fit to command submarines. Subsequently he was, until 1952, operations officer on the staff of the Flag Officer Submarines.

After a short time as executive officer of the aircraft carrier HMS *Theseus*, Hunt was promoted captain and went to run the Admiralty Underwater Detection Establishment at Portland, Dorset.

His next appointment was in command of the anti-submarine frigate *Bigbury Bay* on the West Indies station; as senior naval officer West Indies he took the ship to Jamestown, Virginia, and hosted President Eisenhower on-board during celebrations to mark the 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of the first successful English settlement in North America.

Hunt's last two appointments were as chief of staff to the Flag Officer Submarines and Director of Naval Equipment but at the age of 46 he realised that the Navy had few other challenges to offer and he decided to retire.

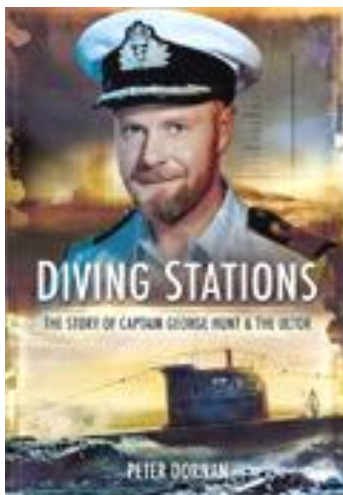
## After the Navy

In 1963 George migrated to Australia and settled in Brisbane where he transferred to the RAN Emergency List. He worked for the British High Commission until 1976.



Centre: Capt George Hunt DSO\* DSC\* RANER (retd),  
with Commander Lachlan King RAN, Commanding Officer NHQSEQ., and  
Don Currell President Submarine Association Queensland Inc,  
at the publishing ceremony, of the book *Diving Stations*.

George joined the Submariners Association of Australia on 22 October 1985. On the formation of the Queensland Branch George accepted the position of Branch Patron. At the SAA's AGM in 1997, George was elected to Life Membership.



He co-wrote his autobiography *Diving Stations* with Peter Dornan<sup>7</sup>.

George Hunt had married Phoebe Silson, a fellow Scot, in 1939 when she was serving as a WRNS. She predeceased him in 2005 and George died on 16 August 2011, survived by their daughter, Susan.

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<sup>7</sup> Dornan, Peter (2010). *Diving Stations: The Story of Captain George Hunt DSO\* DSC\* RN*. Barnsley, South Yorkshire: Pen & Sword Books Ltd. ISBN 9781848843219. Peter DORNAN, AM is also a member of United Service Club and has written several books, many on military history matters.