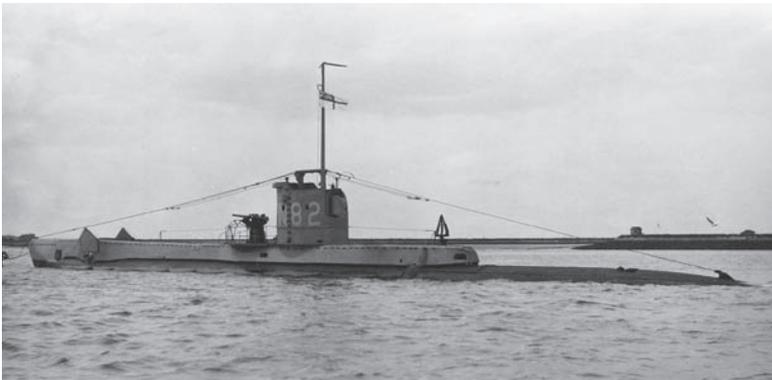


9

LOSS OF *UMPIRE* (MAY – JULY 1941)

We rented a house in Maidstone Road from which I drove daily to the dockyard to watch the building and fitting out of *Umpire* and to learn something about her internal economy. The U-class were excellent little submarines, fairly slow, rather short-range and with a limited number of torpedoes, but exactly what was wanted in Malta. They did great execution against Rommel's supply lines but suffered rather heavy losses. However, these were quickly made up by new building. *Umpire* was bound for Malta after working up.

Wanklyn in *Upholder* was one of the early submarine aces. He had a magnificent record of sinking and seldom returned from patrol without a good score. But as often happens to the most successful, his flotilla commander could not bear to let him go when he was due for



HM Submarine Umpire



relief. He was kept on too long and perhaps acquired something of an invulnerability complex. His last patrol was brilliantly conducted but the escorts were on their toes. Once they had located *Upholder* on their sonar they hunted her relentlessly. Deeper and deeper she went, far beyond her test depth, but still the depth-charge bombardment continued. Eventually the enemy pings ceased to produce an echo. Only a circle of oil fuel marked the spot where her hull lay 1,000 fathoms down. His VC was well earned.³¹

Umpire was completed and I gave her the motto ‘Keep on keeping on’. We sailed on 17 July 1941.

Around midnight on 19 July she was sunk off Great Yarmouth by a Royal Navy armed trawler called *Peter Hendrick*. She was rammed in the torpedo room and sank very quickly. One of the torpedo men gallantly closed the watertight door in the after end of the compartment which ensured that he and his mates all drowned, but gave a chance to the rest of the crew. The submarine settled on the bottom in about 70 feet of water.^{32, *}

I had been on the bridge with the officer of the watch and two lookouts. We floated off as the ship went down but not before I had time to shout to the trawler, ‘You bastard! You’ve sunk a British submarine.’ I was wearing a special kapok-lined Burberry which my wife had given me as a present. I only wore it this one time but it saved my life. I didn’t even get my cap wet as the ship sank. I remember my binoculars floating in front of me, chin high. The officer of the watch, Sub-Lieutenant Godden, and the two lookouts, all of whom were wearing heavy leather seaboots, floated near me and even held on to me for a time, but one by one they dropped away. I continued to float, held up by the buoyancy of my Burberry. I remember nothing much more except the quiet conviction that I was drowning. It wasn’t even painful – just a quiet drifting into unconsciousness. There seemed to

* According to Hezlet’s *History of British Submarine Operations in the Second World War*: On 19 July the new submarine *Umpire*, on passage with convoy EC4 off the Wash, broke down and dropped astern. She was rammed and sunk by an escort of convoy FS44 coming the other way. Wingfield and fourteen men were rescued but two other officers and fourteen men were drowned.



be nothing difficult about dying. My past did *not* all come before me. It was all rather prosaic.

However, at what must have been the eleventh hour – actually forty minutes after the sinking, I felt a wooden oar near me and clutched it desperately. The whaler’s crew from the *Peter Hendrick* had chanced upon my almost lifeless body in the dark and swirling tide. They hauled me aboard, put me face down in the bottom of the boat and deposited me on the trawler’s deck. The first thing I remember was someone reading out from the gold bracelet which I wore on my wrist ‘MRG Wingfield, HM Submarines’.

‘At least we’ve got the bugger’s name,’ said one of my rescuers. I protested that I wasn’t dead and asked if there were any other survivors.

‘None so far,’ they said.

‘I’m the captain,’ I said. ‘You’d better throw me back.’

However, they took me to the ratings’ mess and gave me some rum and I was soon OK. The trawler captain came down to the ratings’ mess in a very hostile frame of mind. ‘It was entirely your fault,’ he said, and stumped off. The men looked after me well but it seemed odd not to be accommodated in the wardroom. It was as if they thought I was a German.

I was landed eventually at Yarmouth and given some dry uniform. Later I sent some money for the trawler crew addressed c/o the Commanding Officer, Royal Naval Reserve. I never had an acknowledgement.

Some hours later about twenty of the crew escaped from the stricken *Umpire* using the Davis Submarine Escape Apparatus. First Lieutenant Edward Young and one other came up through the conning tower hatch without using this apparatus. Edward Young described the experience in his book *One of Our Submarines*.³³

All these were picked up by the surface ships which had congregated at the scene of the accident. About ten men failed to escape and the other three who had been on the bridge with me drowned. There were also several civilian dockyard men on board who were not trained in the use of the escape apparatus and, sadly, none of them survived.



It is painful for me to recall this unfortunate affair, but I will try to give a factual account of the events leading up to the collision. *Umpire* was on her way north, escorted by some sort of a motor launch whose purpose was to ward off medal-hungry attackers. We were supposed to be with the north-bound convoy but due to engine trouble we had dropped astern and were on our own. Our so-called escort steamed off into the night and we never saw her again. At the subsequent inquiry her CO insisted it was my job to keep station on him. The reverse was true.

We were now on the extreme western side of the searched channel with little space between us and the coastal minefields to port. Suddenly the southbound convoy appeared, twenty or thirty dimly lit merchant ships escorted by armed trawlers on each flank. My navigation lights were on but dimmed in view of the likelihood of E-boat attack. I saw the lights of the *Peter Hendrick* dead ahead and turned 20° to port, contrary to the Rules of the Road. Had I turned to starboard, the correct action, I would have put myself right across the bows of the column of southbound ships.

The *Peter Hendrick* turned to starboard and rammed me, possibly thinking I was a U-boat or possibly, as their captain later insisted, because I had not obeyed the Rules of the Road. As I have explained, it was impossible for me to do this owing to the stream of southbound ships close to starboard.

An inquiry was held at Chatham which reached some rather wishy-washy conclusions, attaching no blame to anyone, not even my useless escort. They did not recommend that I be court-martialled (as is normal after the loss of an HM ship), owing to the number of witnesses from different ships who would have to be called and the disruption this would cause to the east-coast convoy system. I was sorry not to have had an opportunity to clear my name, but as I was appointed to a new command soon after the sinking, I take that as sufficient vindication.

With hindsight, I can see I made two mistakes. E-boats were German motor torpedo boats. At this time they were raiding our Channel and North Sea convoy routes nightly, escaping at high speed. Our own



Motor Torpedo Boats (MTBs) were no match for them, despite the gallant exploits of Peter Scott and others. I should have switched on my navigation lights to full brightness as soon as I saw the approaching convoy, disregarding the E-boat threat. Secondly, in turning to port I should have made a bold turn, say 90°, and disregarded the minefield danger. It turned out that the declared minefield was not, as I had thought, a continuous line of mines but a few widely spread clusters.

It would have been reasonable for the *Peter Hendrick* to have held her course or even turned closer to the convoy, which would have left us well clear. Her turn to starboard made a collision certain.