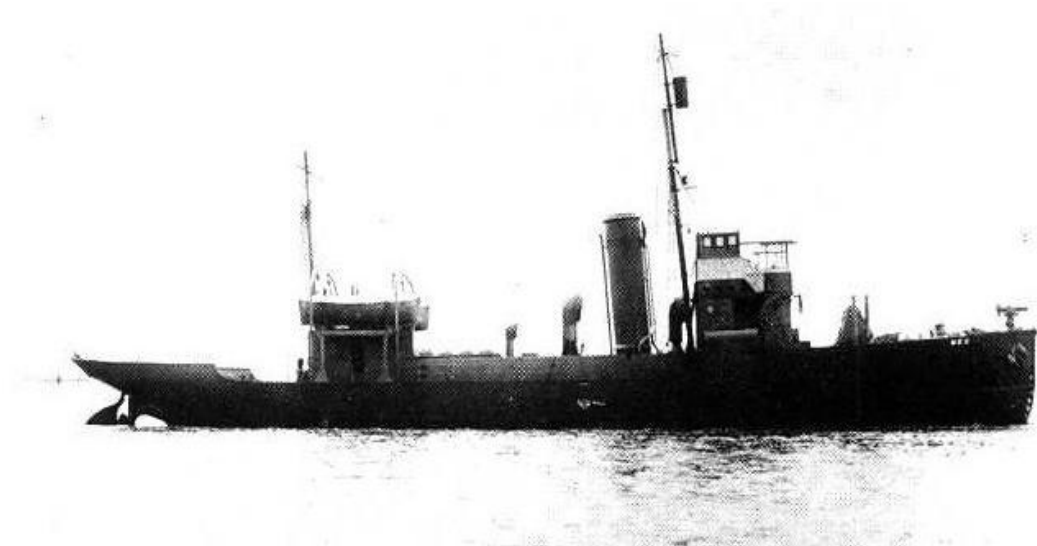


## The Blackwhale Story

*One day late in the first week of December 1917, Oberleutnant zur See Hans Kukenthal sailed Unterseeboot UC49 from a German or occupied Belgian port out into the North Sea. UC49 was a member of the coastal minelayer class of submarines and was loaded with mines to be laid in strategic locations in the sea near Great Britain. Kukenthal's destination on this mission was the area of the North Sea east of the Scottish estuary known as the Firth of Forth. Inside the Firth are the cities of Edinburgh and the major naval port of Rosyth where many of the Royal Navy's capital ships were berthed. The Germans hoped to disrupt warship travel in and out of these ports by laying mines offshore.*

His Majesty's Whaler Blackwhale was one of a class of fifteen small warships called "Whalers" built from designs prepared for the Russian government. These ships were designed for manoeuvrability which made them suitable for patrol or anti-submarine escort duties in coastal waters. Unfortunately their performance in heavy seas was inferior to trawlers and the design was not repeated. Each ship weighed 237 gross tons, measured 125' x 25' x 8.5', and most were armed with a single 12-pound gun (Blackwhale had two guns, one fore, one aft). The ships were originally numbered Z1 to Z15; Blackwhale, launched on 28 June 1915, was Z5, and carried Admiralty number 868<sup>1</sup>. The choice and use of the name "whaler" is not known, except to say that there was no connection to the fishing industry.



No picture of the Blackwhale appears to exist. However, the ship pictured above is a sister ship launched as H.M. Whaler Zedwhale, number 1.16. As far as can be determined, this ship is probably identical to the Blackwhale. These whalers were assigned to three squadrons and together with other ships covered a complex arrangement of twenty-two patrol areas to protect the seas surrounding Britain<sup>2</sup>. The parent ship for Area 9 (the Humber) was the shore establishment H.M.S. Wallington. From there Harry Huffman was posted to H.M. Whaler Blackwhale in late 1917 and readied himself for his first trip to sea.

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<sup>1</sup> F.J. Dittmar and J.J. Colledge, *British Warships 1914-1919*, London, Ian Allan, 1972, page 218.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, page 143.

In the last days of December 1917 twelve merchant ships and Escort Force "R", including the Blackwhale, assembled at the Humber. The Commanding Officer of the destroyer escort group was the captain of the destroyer H.M.S. Ness, Lieutenant-Commander E.H. Daughlish. The Commanding Officer of the trawler escorts was Lieutenant James Kennedy, captain of the H.M. Whaler Blackwhale and its crew of thirty-one. According to the sailing orders for the group they departed the Humber at 1500 hrs on 1 January 1918<sup>3</sup> and proceeded north to the Tyne area. There, they picked up a further fifteen merchantmen and one additional destroyer escort. The convoy then set course for Lerwick in the Shetland Islands, a stopover on the way to their possible destination in Scandinavia.

The winter weather and sea conditions at the time were variously described in later statements made by other ships' commanding officers. Through the haze the moon could occasionally be seen between the clouds. There were "frequent snow showers". Other accounts included the phrases "high seas", "sea rough", "strong NE gale", and "wind NE Force 6-7". According to the Beaufort Wind Scale, forces of 6 or 7 translate into winds of 22-33 knots (25-38 mph) defined as "strong breeze" to "near gale"<sup>4</sup>. The sea was heaping up, with waves 18-20 feet in height with whitecaps, spray, and white foam streakers off the breakers<sup>5</sup>.

The convoy proceeded eastward slowly but normally with Blackwhale leading the entire convoy. There were reports to suggest that some ships had lost station with others and that the convoy had become somewhat scattered and out-of-touch. Not all ships had radio and relied instead on visual contact either by flag hoists, by Morse torch signals, by semaphore, or by siren. The poor weather, high winds and sea conditions were also factors influencing the ships' abilities to keep station.

Late during the evening of the next day, 2 January 1918, Blackwhale received a signal from the CO of the destroyer escorts to alter course to Latitude 57°N, Longitude 0°. Blackwhale altered course to N48°E magnetic and speed was established at an average 4 knots. Lt. Kennedy retired at about 0200, leaving Officer of the Watch James Mair in command.

Later during that watch at about 0345 Mair suddenly sighted a black object immediately on his bow. Kennedy's later report stated "starboard side"<sup>6</sup> although other witnesses stated "port". We have since learned that the object was a contact mine laid by U-boat UC49 about three weeks earlier on 10 December 1917<sup>7</sup>.

Every sailor's worst nightmare was about to begin.

There was no time for Mair to take evasive action. When the drifting mine made contact with the Blackwhale there was a huge explosion that blew a gaping hole in the hull between #1 and #2 decks. Instantly, ten sleeping men were killed in their forward mess deck. Had Dad also been there in his hammock he most certainly would have perished along with his mates. However, by the luck of the draw, he was on duty further aft in the boiler room, shovelling coal. He was wearing wooden clogs – standard footwear on the hot ash- and cinder-strewn deck of the boiler room – and one got stuck in the ladder as he clambered to the upper deck.

The location was Lat. 56.19° N, Long. 0.45° W, 100 mi/160 km due east of Fife Ness, Scotland.

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<sup>3</sup> The National Archives, Kew, Richmond, Surrey, U.K., ADM 137/3405, pp.369, 370.

<sup>4</sup> Beaufort Wind Scale developed in 1805 by Admiral Sir Francis Beaufort, R.N., hydrographer.

<sup>5</sup> ADM 137/3405, Minutes of the Enquiry.

<sup>6</sup> ADM 137/3405, pp. 363.

<sup>7</sup> Admiral Arno Spindler, *Handelskrieg mit U-Booten*, an examination of the U-boat's KTB (*Kriegstagebuecher*) or war diary, quoted from Great War Forum at <http://invisionzone1914-1918.com>



Quickly, the ship began to settle by the bow. The wireless radio was inoperable as the “rotary” (generator) had been located below deck and was flooded. Torch signals were made to nearby ships and the signalman volunteered to go to the bridge and Morse a signal on the siren before the steam ran off. None of these signals received a reply from any ships as they sailed past, apparently unaware of Blackwhale’s plight, and having misunderstood the messages.

Kennedy gave orders to lower the two boats. One was lowered with ten men in it, but the heavy seas swept it free of its tackles. The second boat was lowered with three men in it to secure it, but it too broke loose and was carried off by the wind and heavy swell. Kennedy and eight men – Dad among them – now remained aboard the sinking ship, with no boat. There remained only a raft described by 2<sup>nd</sup> Hand J.E. Morgan as “... three planks with two barrels one on each side”<sup>8</sup>. Dad’s own recollection of the raft added a rope, strung between two posts.

In desperation, Kennedy made one more torch signal to a destroyer. Providentially he received an affirmative answer. About 45 minutes later, a trawler appeared and made an unsuccessful attempt to pass a line to Blackwhale. The trawler, H.M.T. Grosbeak<sup>9</sup>, then lowered a boat in an attempt to get across to the Blackwhale, but the boat capsized in the rough sea and all men were thrown into the water. The men were promptly picked up, but while this was going on Blackwhale was continuing to sink. Kennedy ordered the eight ratings to take to the raft while he took refuge on a broken ladder held, I believe, to the raft by rope. Shortly thereafter at about 0615 Blackwhale slewed broadside to the sea and went under<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> ADM 137/3405, p. 401.

<sup>9</sup> The Grosbeak had been a privately owned fishing trawler requisitioned by the Admiralty in October 1914. She had been converted to a minesweeper and fitted with one 12-pound gun. Many hundreds of such requisitions took place.

<sup>10</sup> ADM 137/3405, p. 364.

Seaman William Lyall later gave an account of what happened next. The raft was still very close to the Blackwhale as she went down, and the suction of the sinking ship caused turbulence that threw seven of the men off the raft. Only Chief Petty Officer Alfred Beresford was able to hang on. Six men were able to return to the raft, but Ordinary Seaman Tom Kirk did not, disappearing into the cold black water, in the dark. Although the Grosbeak was nearby, manoeuvring her to within reach of the raft was extremely difficult and dangerous. After doing so and while the crew desperately tried to get the men on board, a further casualty occurred: Beresford attempted three times to get to the Grosbeak's upper deck, but finally fell back into the sea and disappeared<sup>11</sup>.

If Lt. Kennedy's estimate of the time frame is correct, between the time of the explosion and the time of the rescue the men had been completely exposed to the elements for more than two and one-half hours. Although no witness commented on the temperature of the air, it can be assumed to have been at or below the freezing mark and the winds were strong. By this time, the weakened men were completely soaked with freezing water and undoubtedly were suffering from a life-threatening degree of hypothermia. It has been said that the life expectancy of a man in the frigid North Sea water in January was measured in minutes.

The six remaining on the raft, Lt. Kennedy, and the three who were adrift in the second boat were all rescued by the Grosbeak. Without doubt every man owed his life to the daring, the skill, and the excellent seamanship of Grosbeak's skipper Mr. John C. Smith<sup>12</sup> in making this dangerous rescue. He searched the sea for another 45 minutes, and then prepared to shape course for Aberdeen. As the superior officer, Lt. Kennedy ordered him instead to proceed to the Tyne<sup>13</sup>. Unknown to the survivors at this time, the ten men who earlier had been swept away in Blackwhale's first boat had already been picked up by the Swedish merchantman S.S. Ethel and were proceeding to Lerwick.

On 4 January Dad's name appeared as a survivor in a telegram from the Naval Depot at Immingham to the Admiralty in London<sup>14</sup>. The following day, Lt. Kennedy made his preliminary report of the event. In concluding his statement he wrote "I would like to report most favourably on the loyalty and excellent conduct of the following men who remained with me to the last..." Dad's name tops the list of the nine survivors, six from the raft, and three from second lifeboat<sup>15</sup>.

Dad recalled being in the hospital at Grimsby, England. As soon as he arrived there he was rolled up in a blanket-sized mustard plaster meant to help restore his body temperature. Although the heat provided by this treatment may well have contributed to his recovery, when the poultice was removed it burned from his back a piece of flesh about three inches square. He had the scar for the rest of his life.

The Admiralty subsequently held an Enquiry into the loss of the Blackwhale. Ten of the twenty surviving crewmembers as well as several captains of other convoy ships were summoned to appear as witnesses on 16 January 1918. Dad was not among the witnesses; he may still have been in hospital. Within the minutes are the conclusions drawn by the officers who conducted it. One conclusion was that look-outs on all the ships that sailed past the sinking Blackwhale had done a poor job of observing what had happened. Further enquiry into this matter was ordered, but the results are not contained in this file.

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<sup>11</sup> ADM 137/3405, pp. 390-391, pp. 402-403.

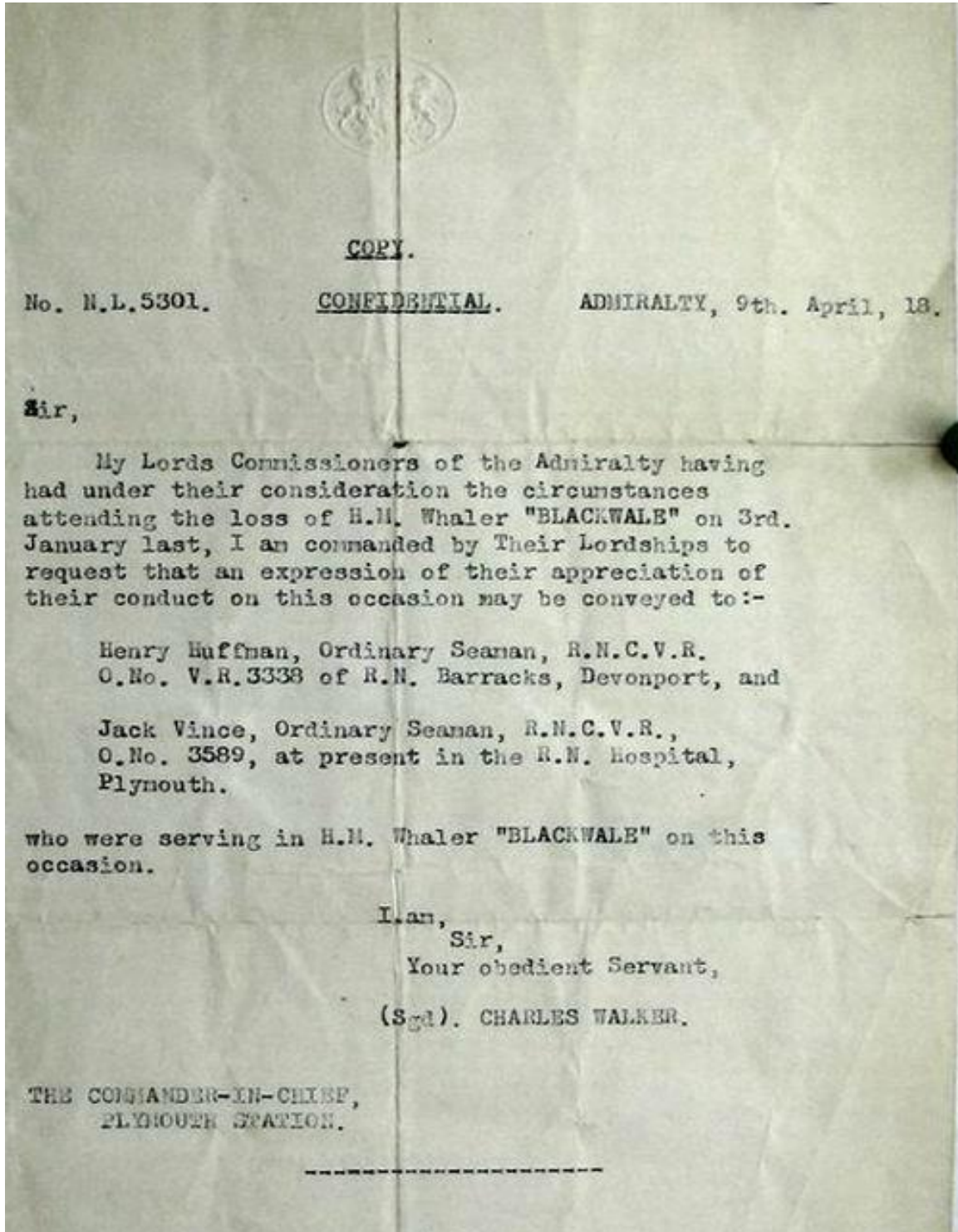
<sup>12</sup> ADM 137/3405, P. 408.

<sup>13</sup> ADM 137/3405, p.379.

<sup>14</sup> ADM 137/3405, p. 405.

<sup>15</sup> ADM 137/3405, p.365.

Several months later, Dad and one of his mates jointly received a letter from the Lords of the Admiralty expressing appreciation for their conduct while serving in the Blackwhale at the time of its sinking. More plainly, it was a letter congratulating them on their survival. Four other survivors received such letters. At the same time, condolences were sent to the next-of-kin of those who did not survive.



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ADMIRALTY, 9th. April, 18.

Sir,

My Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty having had under their consideration the circumstances attending the loss of H.M. Whaler "BLACKWALE" on 3rd. January last, I am commanded by Their Lordships to request that an expression of their appreciation of their conduct on this occasion may be conveyed to:-

Henry Huffman, Ordinary Seaman, R.N.C.V.R.  
O.No. V.R.3338 of R.N. Barracks, Devonport, and

Jack Vince, Ordinary Seaman, R.N.C.V.R.,  
O.No. 3589, at present in the R.N. Hospital,  
Plymouth.

who were serving in H.M. Whaler "BLACKWALE" on this occasion.

I am,

Sir,

Your obedient Servant,

(Sgd). CHARLES WALKER.

THE COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF,  
PLYMOUTH STATION.

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Fully recovered by April 1918, Dad sailed to a new posting at H.M.S. Cormorant, the Royal Navy base at Gibraltar. This tour of duty involved minesweeping in the Straits of Gibraltar and the Mediterranean Sea aboard wooden, Canadian-built, Admiralty 'drifters' CD72 and CD75. Rigged out in his whites and sporting a moustache, he had his picture taken on 4 July 1918.



While he was at 'Gib', World War I officially came to an end on 11 November 1918.

Despite this, Dad volunteered for further duty. This posting lasted two more months until January 1919 when he returned to H.M.S. Vivid in England. From there, he boarded the S.S. Baltic in Liverpool<sup>16</sup> on 12 March for the return to Halifax. He was discharged with the rank of Able Seaman<sup>17</sup> from H.M.C.S. Niobe on 23 April 1919, and returned home to Stoney Creek. Later, he was awarded the British War Medal and the Victory Medal.

*Finally, to conclude their part in this affair, Unterseeboot UC49 with Oberleutnant zur See Hans Kukenthal and his crew of 31 men was intercepted in the English Channel on 8 August 1918 by the British destroyer H.M.S. Opossum. East of Start Point, U.K. the U-boat submerged and attempted to flee but was depth-charged and went to the bottom. There were no survivors.<sup>18</sup>*

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<sup>16</sup> Library and Archives Canada microfilm Number T-14794, Halifax Passenger Lists 1865-1922. Ship's Manifest for S.S. Baltic.

<sup>17</sup> Library and Archives Canada World War I Service Record. Rank noted in Calculation of War Service Gratuity document.

<sup>18</sup> U-boat.net

## Sources

This account of the sinking of the H.M. Whaler Blackwhale is a composite of information from the sources listed below. Most of the information was taken from the Admiralty documents; complete footnotes have not been entered due to the random and complex nature of those sources.

1. ADM 1/8509/6 and ADM 137/3405, Admiralty documents obtained from The National Archives, Kew, Richmond, Surrey, TW9 4DU, United Kingdom.
2. Dittmar, F.J., & Colledge, J.J., British Warships 1914-1919, London, Ian Allan, 1972. ISBN 07110038807.
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5. Library and Archives Canada
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Welland, ON 2012