

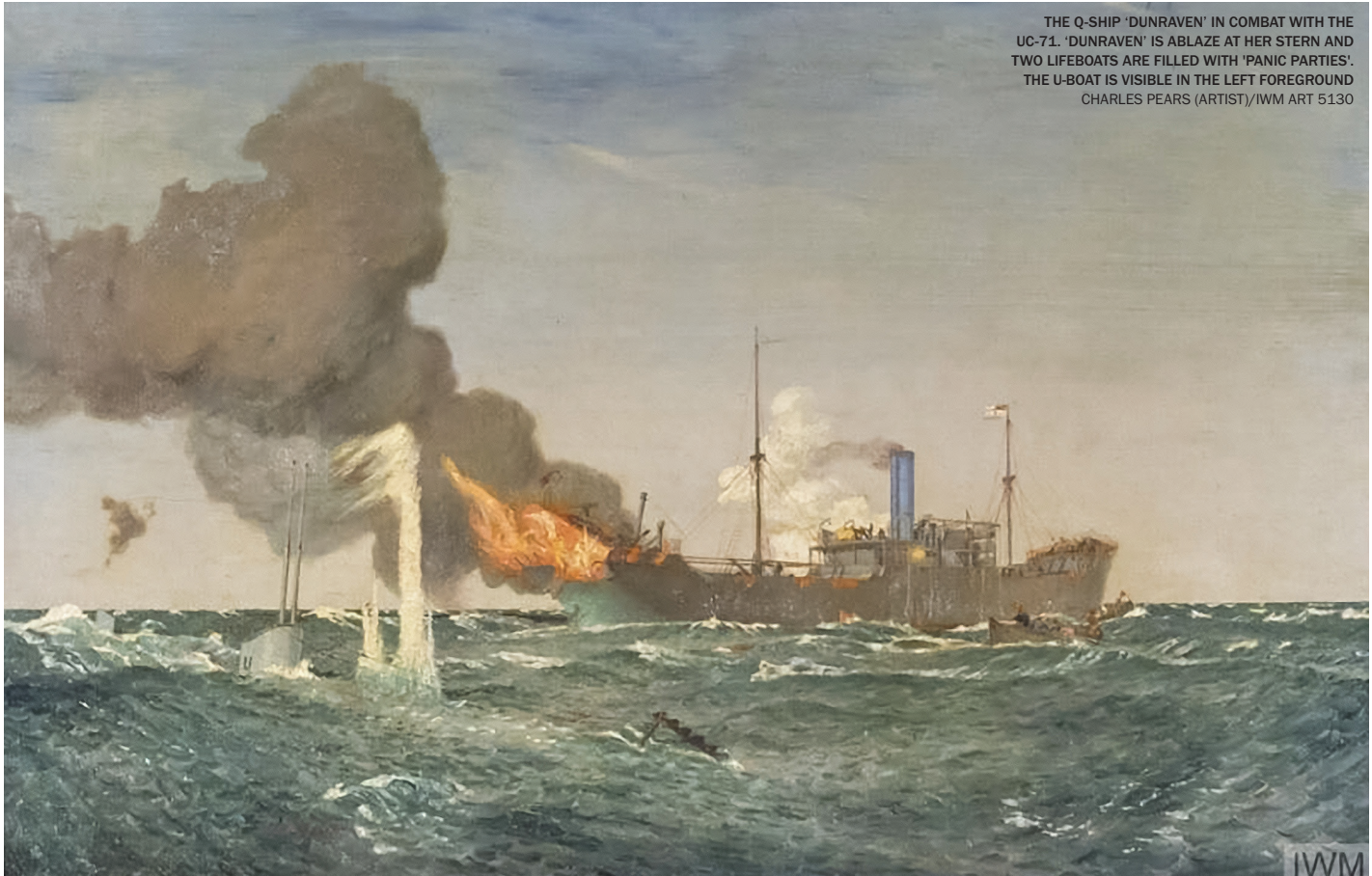
Chief
Petty Officer
Ernest
Herbert
Pitcher VC,
DSM



HERO *of the* MONTH

By Lord Ashcroft

PETTY OFFICER ERNEST HERBERT PITCHER VC
HISTORY AND ART COLLECTION/ALAMY



THE Q-SHIP 'DUNRAVEN' IN COMBAT WITH THE UC-71. 'DUNRAVEN' IS ABLAZE AT HER STERN AND TWO LIFEBOATS ARE FILLED WITH 'PANIC PARTIES'. THE U-BOAT IS VISIBLE IN THE LEFT FOREGROUND
CHARLES PEARS (ARTIST)/IWM ART 5130

The momentous events on board HMS *Dunraven* in the summer of 1917 changed the life of Ernest Pitcher for ever. He was only too happy to acknowledge this fact and he even named both his daughter and his house 'Dunraven' in the years after World War One. I am the proud and humble custodian of his medal group having purchased it at a Dix Noonan Webb auction in 1988.

Ernest Herbert Pitcher was born in Mullion, Cornwall, on December 31, 1887. He was the son of George Pitcher, a coastguard, and his wife Sarah (née Beverstock). When he was a boy, his parents moved to Dorset where his father continued to work as a coastguard and Ernest attended Swanage Board School.

It is believed that Pitcher left school at around 13 and initially worked as a plumber's mate. However, he joined the Royal Navy when he was about 14, in the rank of Boy 2nd Class, at first serving in HMS *Boscawen*. In February 1904, Pitcher was promoted to Boy 1st Class and the following summer he served in HMS *Vernon*, a stone frigate. From September of the same year, he served in HMS *Terrible*, a cruiser, followed by other postings.

Submarine scourge

At the outbreak of the war in August 1914, Pitcher was serving in the dreadnought HMS *King George V*, flagship of the Second Battle Squadron. However, in 1915, he

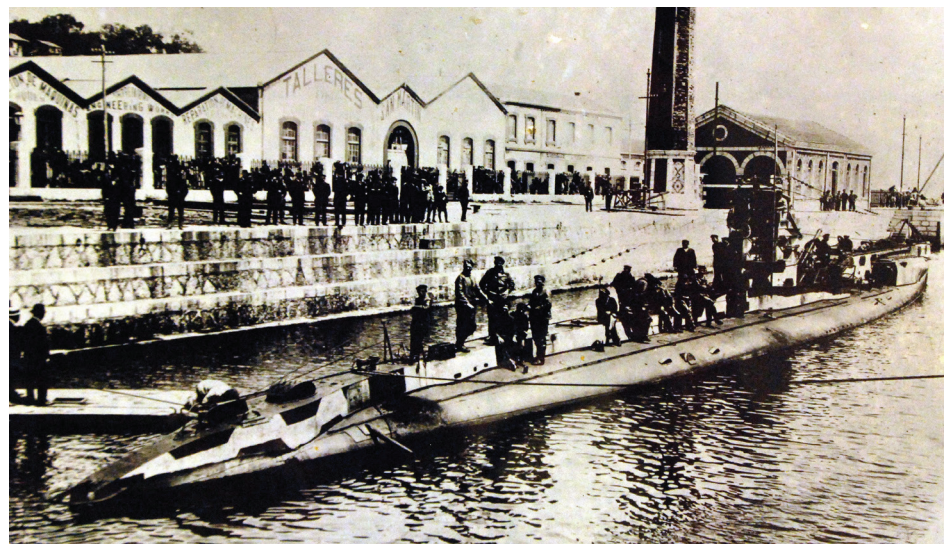
"In 1915, Pitcher volunteered for service in the expanding Q-ship fleet, at one stage Britain's answer to the U-boats"

volunteered for service in the expanding Q-ship fleet, at one stage Britain's answer to German U-boats, which had caused terrible damage to the Allies' merchant fleets in the early stages of the war.

A pattern had emerged whereby a U-boat, to preserve costly torpedoes and allow it to plunder its target's valuables, would surface close to a merchant ship and accept the soft target's surrender. The merchant

crew would then leave their ship to the submariners, who would take any valuables that took their fancy before scuttling it.

The Q-ship, an armed decoy disguised to look like a merchant ship, was devised to combat this practice. As soon as the U-boat surfaced and came into range, hitherto hidden guns were uncovered and the Q-ship would attempt to blow it out of the water.



THE TYPE UC II MINELAYING SUBMARINE SM UC-56, OF THE SAME CLASS AS UC-71 NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE USN

Q-ships were crewed largely by men from the Royal Navy Reserve, but bolstered by regulars from the Royal Navy with experience in gunnery.

By the time Pitcher was serving in Q-ships, he had received two further promotions, first to Leading Seaman and then to Petty Officer. He initially served in the ex-collier *Loderer*, which became known as HMS *Farnborough*, or Q.5. In fact, *Loderer* was renamed after the Admiralty received an anonymous tip-off that her new role as U-boat bait had been leaked to the Germans.

The 1904-built ship was fitted out at the naval dockyard in Devonport, Plymouth, with the typical devices of a Q-ship: five 12-pounder guns variously concealed by a "steering house" aft, hinged flaps on the main deck and dummy cabins on the upper deck; two 6-pounder guns hidden at either end of the bridge; and a Maxim machine gun in a dummy hencoop amidships. There were 11 officers and 56 men on board, with Pitcher one of the few regular Royal Navy ratings.

On March 22, 1916, *Farnborough* made the fourth Q-ship U-boat kill of the war when she sank Kapitänleutnant Guntzel's U-68 with all hands. This success led

to the Q-ship's captain, Lieutenant-Commander Gordon Campbell, being promoted to commander and awarded the Distinguished Service Order. On February 17, 1917, to the west of Ireland, *Farnborough* accounted for her second kill, U-83, which was sunk with the loss of all hands bar an officer and one seaman. Campbell was awarded the Victoria Cross and Pitcher was mentioned in despatches.

Red-hot deck

Shortly after, Pitcher and most of the rest of Q.5's crew elected to follow Commander Campbell to his next Q-ship: another former collier renamed HMS *Pargust*. She had improved equipment and armaments, including a 4in gun, and went to sea in May, but she was torpedoed a month later by Kapitänleutnant Rose's UC-29.

The decoy "panic party" left the ship and when the U-boat surfaced the remaining crew fired 38 shells at it, causing it to blow up and sink. The damaged *Pargust* was towed into a nearby port the next day and her crew survived the attack. Under Rule 13 of the VC Royal Warrant, an officer and a rating were each awarded the VC on behalf

of the whole crew, while Commander Campbell was promoted to captain and received a bar to his DSO.

Pitcher was awarded one of eight Distinguished Service Medals for this June 1917 action. By this point, he was regarded as one of Campbell's most dependable and steadiest crewmen. As a gun captain, Pitcher was cool and calm, capable of keeping his nerve and of doing a dangerous job under heavy enemy fire.

Most of the crew elected to follow Campbell on to his next command, the *Dunraven*. At 10.58am on August 8, 1917, their new ship, carefully disguised as a British merchant vessel, was zigzagging some 130 miles offshore in the Bay of Biscay when a German U-boat was sighted on the horizon.

Dunraven maintained course as the U-boat, UC-71, closed. At 11.17am, the submarine dived, then resurfaced 5,000 yards away on the starboard quarter. It opened fire at 11.43am and Campbell, acting in the manner of a panicking merchant captain, sent out a distress signal giving his ship's position. He also fired off some token rounds from one of the ship's small guns, as if it were the only weapon he possessed.



ERNEST PITCHER WITH KING GEORGE V AND QUEEN MARY COURTESY OF LORD ASHCROFT

The U-boat closed, and, when a torpedo almost hit *Dunraven*, the crew generated steam to simulate boiler trouble. At the same time, Campbell dispatched a “panic party” to make it look as if the ship was being abandoned.

The submarine then opened fire with its deck gun, scoring three quick hits on *Dunraven*'s poop. The first detonated a depth charge which wounded three men and cut communications between Pitcher, the captain of the 4in gun crew and the bridge. However, Pitcher's team decided not to move, since leaving the ship would have given the game away. It was imperative the Germans remain convinced that the ship had already been abandoned.

The second and third shells started a major fire, which meant Pitcher and several others were now concealed on a “red-hot deck”. They lifted boxes of cordite off the deck and on to their knees in a bid to stop them exploding, but still they did not flee.

Impossible decision

At that point, UC-71 was obscured by black smoke from *Dunraven*'s stern, which presented Campbell with a dilemma. He knew an explosion on his own vessel was inevitable, but if he delayed in giving the order to abandon ship he might get a clear shot at the submarine.

He later wrote: “To cold-bloodedly leave the gun's crew to their fate seemed awful, and the names of each of them flashed through my mind, but our duty was to sink the submarine. By losing a few men we might save thousands not only of lives but of ships and tons of the nation's requirements. I decided to wait.”

The inevitable explosion came at 12.58pm, before the U-boat could be fired upon. It blew out the stern of the ship and propelled the 4in gun and its crew into the air. The gun landed on the well-deck and one man was thrown into the sea, while Pitcher and another crewman landed on mock railway trucks made of wood and canvas, which cushioned their falls and saved their lives.

As UC-71 crash-dived, two shots were fired at her, but without any telling effect. Pitcher and the other wounded men were then removed to the cabins, where they stayed for the rest of the action with “shells exploding all around them”.

As Campbell was preparing a torpedo attack, *Dunraven* was shelled abaft the engine room. Then the U-boat resurfaced and for 20 minutes shelled the Q-ship until diving again at 2.50pm.

Campbell responded by firing two torpedoes. Both missed but, fortunately



COURTESY OF LORD ASHCROFT

for *Dunraven*'s crew, the U-boat had by this point exhausted its own supply of torpedoes and fled the scene.

A British destroyer, HMS *Christopher*, towed the battered Q-ship towards Plymouth but, as the weather deteriorated, she sank at 3am. Many bravery awards were made to the crew, with the VC assigned specifically to Pitcher's gun crew going to him after a ballot to see who should receive it.

The officer to receive the VC under the same rules was Lieutenant Charles Bonner. Both decorations were announced in *The London Gazette* on November 2, 1917. Campbell was awarded a second bar to his DSO.

Fêted hero

However, this double VC action involving *Dunraven* was a turning point. Three weeks after her sinking, it was agreed that there was a stalemate in this form of warfare, and the Q-ship service was wound down.

The UC-71 became an extremely successful U-boat, sinking 63 ships and damaging 18 before the Armistice. She sank in the North Sea in early 1919 while on the way to being surrendered to the Royal Navy.

Pitcher received his VC from George V at an investiture at Buckingham Palace on December 5. He was also decorated with the French Médaille Militaire and the Croix de Guerre. He was treated as a hero for the rest of his life and was a striking figure with his dark beard.

Pitcher survived the war and in 1918 married Lily Evers in Wareham, Dorset. The couple went on to have a daughter, who was christened Ruth Mary *Dunraven* Pitcher. On August 1, 1920, Pitcher was promoted to Chief Petty Officer. He retired from the Royal Navy on December 30, 1927 after a quarter of a century's service. His retirement also came just a day before

his 40th birthday. Pitcher then worked in Swanage as a woodwork teacher in a boys' preparatory school. For a time, he also ran a pub, the Royal Oak in Herston, Dorset.

However, after the outbreak of World War Two, Pitcher rejoined the Royal Navy on August 5, 1940, and served on shore for five years at Poole, Portland and Yeovilton.

His final years were spent at his home, 'Dunraven', in Richmond Road, Swanage. He died at the Royal Naval Auxiliary Hospital in Sherborne, Dorset, on February 10, 1946, aged 58.

He was buried at Northbrook Cemetery, Swanage, where his Commonwealth War Graves Commission headstone bears an image of the VC and is engraved with the words: “At the going down of the sun and in the morning, we will remember them.”

A memorial tablet in Pitcher's honour was unveiled at Swanage Parish Church on Armistice Day, 1963. **BW**

“By losing a few men we might save thousands not only of lives but of ships and tons of the nation's requirements. I decided to wait”

VICTORIA CROSS HEROES VOL II



Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC is a businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. His book, *Victoria Cross Heroes Volume II*, was published in 2016 and is available in hardback and paperback. For more

information, visit victoriacrossheroes2.com.

Lord Ashcroft's VC and GC collection is on public display at the Imperial War

Museum, London. For more information, visit iwm.org.uk/heroes and details about

his VC collection may be found at lordashcroftmedals.com. For more information

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