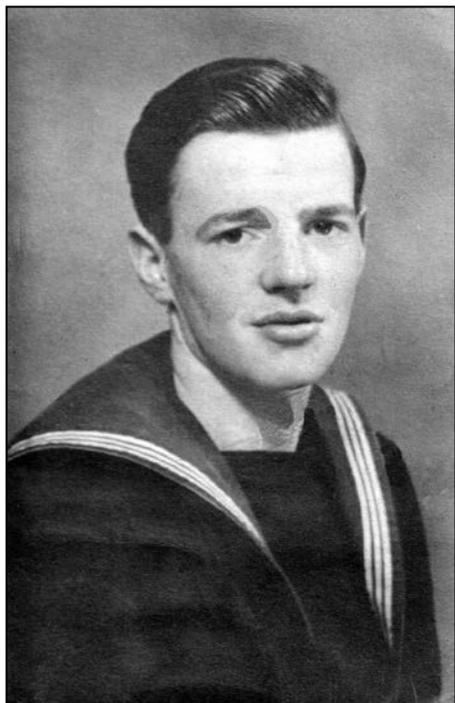


D/JX 421814 Seaman Robert Rendall Harcus



Robert Harcus was born in Kirkwall on 28th April 1924, the youngest son of Sinclair Harcus and Margaret Harcus (née Rendall). The large family had moved to Kirkwall from Sanday, but came originally from Westray.

After his call up aged eighteen, Robert joined the Royal Navy as a seaman on 3rd March 1943. He completed two months of basic training at HMS *Raleigh* and HMS *Drake* in Plymouth. On 12th June Robert travelled to Portsmouth, to start another two months' training next day as a submariner at HMS *Dolphin*, the Royal Navy Submarine School at Fort Blockhouse in Gosport.

On 12th August Robert returned to Scotland, when he was posted to HMS *Varbel* on the Isle of Bute in the Clyde. Its Kyles Hydropathic Hotel between 1942 and 1945 was the HQ of the 12th Submarine Flotilla, responsible for the Royal Navy's midget submarines.

The submariners training to use the X-Craft midget submarines for an attack on the German battleship *Tirpitz* in Norway used old warships anchored in nearby Loch Striven for practice missions. Robert stayed on board the old Submarine Depot Ship HMS *Titania*, earlier responsible for the Royal Navy's human torpedoes or chariots, but now a depot for submariners training in X-Craft.

The six X-Craft selected for Operation Source, the attack on German warships in Altenfjord, had moved to the forward base at Loch Cairnbawn in Sutherland. They sailed from there towed by parent submarines on 11th September. Weather and other problems reduced the attack force to four and only target the *Tirpitz*, but X-6 and X-7 dropped four charges under the battleship on the 22nd, causing significant damage that took *Tirpitz* out of the war for about six months.

Robert must have found involvement in midget submarine training both interesting and exciting, taking pride in their successful mission against the *Tirpitz*. He knew that his elder brother Jim had already sailed on at least two Arctic Convoys, so could be at risk from German warships based in Norway during other trips. However, Robert's mother told him that submarines were the only type of ship that she did not want him to serve in. Robert spent a month based on the torpedo recovery vessel HMS *Elfin*, before he reluctantly opted out of submarine training. Robert returned to Plymouth to restart training at HMS *Drake* on 20th December. He left on 8th January 1944 to join the M-class destroyer HMS *Mahratta*, as an Ordinary Seaman.

HMS *Mahratta*, under the name of HMS *Marksman*, was laid down on 21st January 1940 by Scotts of Greenock. The incomplete structure was blown off the slipway during the Clydeside air raids on 6th and 7th May 1941 that killed 300 people in Greenock.

Rebuild of the ship started on 18th August and she was launched on 28th July 1942 as HMS *Mahratta*. Walsall had sponsored building the destroyer through their War Aid Fund and the name change was not popular in the town or with the ship's company. The *Mahratta* Brigade had offered to sponsor a warship, as the Gurkhas had already done, and the King had given his consent on 19th May. HMS *Mahratta* was commissioned on 8th April 1943 and travelled north to join the 3rd Destroyer Flotilla of the Home Fleet in Scapa Flow on the 11th. Early service included a trip screening the major warships replenishing the Spitzbergen garrison in June.



HMS *Mahratta* made her first journey to Murmansk in August, when she took out RAF personnel to support aircraft used for reconnaissance of the battleship Tirpitz's base at Altenfjord. Another fast trip to Murmansk in October, with cruisers HMS *London* and USS *Augusta* to deliver several

Lease-Lend ships to the Soviet Navy, was followed by duties as a close escort of Convoy RA54A, a dozen merchant ships returned safely to the UK. The destroyer then spent six weeks, including Christmas, having a refit at Brigham and Cowan shipyard in Hull. It was there that Robert Marcus joined her crew, in which he served as an Oerlikon anti-aircraft gunner.

HMS *Mahratta* returned to Scapa Flow on 13th January 1944. The destroyer joined the ocean escort for Arctic Convoy JW56B, which came under sustained U-boat attacks and lost the destroyer HMS *Hardy* sunk on 30th January, although all 16 of its merchant ships reached the Kola Inlet safely. HMS *Hardy*'s stern was blown off by a T-5 acoustic torpedo, called a Gnat by the Allies. 33 of her crew were missing (two wounded later died), the rest were taken off by HMS *Venus*, before one of the destroyer's torpedoes hastened HMS *Hardy*'s end. HMS *Mahratta* returned safely to Scapa, after escorting the same ships homeward in Convoy RA56.

HMS *Mahratta* joined another outbound Arctic Convoy JW57. It consisted of 40 freighters, two tankers doubling as oilers and a rescue ship, *Copeland*. The numerous close support ships included two Western Approaches support groups. Two significant warships that took station within the convoy were the anti-aircraft cruiser *Black Prince* and the escort carrier *Chaser*, with 11 radar-equipped Swordfish for anti-submarine detection and 11 Wildcat fighters on board. HMS *Mahratta* was one of thirteen destroyers deployed to support the convoy's winter passage.

The convoy sailed from Loch Ewe on 20th February and all the merchant ships safely reached Kola Inlet, but HMS *Mahratta* did not. Sightings of the convoy by German Junkers 88 and Condor aircraft brought in U-boats of the Werewolf and Hartmut wolfpacks. In the evening of 25th February, while she was escorting the convoy's rear section, HMS *Mahratta*'s stern was hit by a Gnat torpedo fired by U-990. Stopped by that torpedo hit, the destroyer was then hit again about five minutes later by a second torpedo amidships.

HMS *Mahratta*'s prompt radio calls for help brought the destroyers HMS *Impulsive* and HMS *Wanderer* quickly to the scene. While *Impulsive* closed through snow flurries, HMS *Mahratta* suddenly rolled over to port and capsized. Desperate attempts by the crew of HMS *Impulsive* to find and recover men from the sea picked up only 17, one of whom died of wounds that night, so 11 officers and 209 ratings, including Robert Marcus, of HMS *Mahratta* died.

Robert Marcus, who died at sea aged only 19, is commemorated on the Kirkwall War Memorial, also on Panel 88 of the Plymouth Naval Memorial in Devon. Two other Orcadian Royal Navy sailors, Frankie Johnston of Harray who also died serving on the Arctic Convoys, and William Muir of Stromness, are commemorated with Robert on the Plymouth Naval Memorial.

