

COMMANDER "JAKE" DEREK GEORGE HARBOE WRIGHT DSC AND TWO BARS (29-32)

He was known to his naval friends as Jake and was born at Mortlake on 29 September 1915. According to the Telegraph obituary he hated his schooldays at the College and in later life never referred to them.

He joined Brooke Bond in 1932, intending to learn the tea trade before joining his mother's family's company, SAP Smith (Tea Brokers). His family lived at Teddington and owned various sailing vessels on the Thames and on the south coast.

He volunteered for the RNVR in 1937, served in a tug at Dunkirk, and in July 1940 was commissioned as a sub-lieutenant at the training establishment HMS King Alfred at Hove marina.

He spent the war fighting in fast motorboats in the Narrow Seas of the English Channel and the southern North Sea. He was first blooded when, as first lieutenant of MTB 32, his patrol sank two armed trawlers off Calais on 11 October 1940.

Then, on the night of 17/18 December, when patrolling silently through the mist off the River Scheldt, he had just told his commanding officer, "Any closer and we'll be in the Grand Hotel at Flushing", when the 6,300-ton freighter Birkenfels appeared out of the gloom. She was promptly torpedoed.



He quickly rose to command his own boats, and after a year in MTB 331 and in his old boat, MTB 32, he was awarded, in September 1942, his first DSC "For enterprise and coolness in action against enemy E-Boats and armed trawlers off the Dutch Coast, while serving in HM Motor Torpedo Boats and Motor Gun Boats."

On 15/16 March 1943, on his first sortie as senior officer, 22nd MTB Flotilla, he scored a notable success off the Dutch coast. Employing a tactic, which would become his trademark, he stalked an enemy convoy at low speed in order to avoid showing any bow wave. Patiently, he took an hour and a half to creep up on the convoy from the port quarter, moving across its wake and up on its starboard side so as to take advantage of the light of the moon.

Then, from close range, he launched a sudden torpedo attack on three merchant ships and a destroyer, hitting two of them. For this "thoroughly satisfying little engagement" he was awarded, in the New Year's Honours of 1944, a Bar to his DSC "For gallantry or outstanding service in the face of the enemy, or for zeal, patience and cheerfulness in dangerous waters and for setting an example of whole hearted devotion to duty, upholding the high traditions of the Royal Navy."

Throughout July 1944 he fought a series of successful actions. On the night of 3/4 July he torpedoed a minesweeper and on 13/14 July 1944 he fought a battle with three German patrol boats off IJmuiden, sinking one of them. He was awarded a second Bar to his DSC for outstanding courage, skill and determination.

So far his war had been fought in "short" motorboats, which were armed either with guns or torpedoes. But in August 1944 he was given command of a flotilla of five improved Fairmile D-class boats known as "Dog Boats". These were fitted with the latest improvements, including guns and torpedoes, as well as bridge armour and radar. The Dog Boats were, however, still made of plywood and carried several thousand gallons of fuel, and were thus fragile and vulnerable in action.



In August 1944 he was commanding officer of MTB 687 and senior officer of the 58th MTB Flotilla, and by now one of the most experienced of all coastal forces commanders. While leading a patrol across the North Sea, north of Walcheren he detected a heavily escorted enemy convoy and stalked it for an hour. Approaching silently until he was at 1,000 yards range, he ordered full power and launched a devastating attack with guns and torpedoes, sinking or hitting four of the enemy ships.



He was mentioned in dispatches in November 1944 for his outstanding courage, resolution and skill in many successful engagements with the enemy. It was said that with Wright at the helm his crew would come back alive, and consequently men were keen to serve in his boat and his flotilla.

On May 13 1945, accompanied by his fellow MTB captains (including the future naturalist and broadcaster Lt-Cdr Peter Scott), he rendezvoused at the South Falls buoy at the entrance to the Thames with two surrendered German E-boats which had come to hand over charts of German minefields and wore flags of surrender. He boarded the boat carrying Admiral Karl Brauning and, for the last 50 miles to Felixstowe, he had the opportunity to compare the sea keeping qualities of the different boats. In the British boats – which were susceptible to wash over the bows – the crew wore oilskins; the German boats were drier, and Admiral Brauning wore his smart leather overcoat. But he also noted that the E-boats rolled more, making them poor gun platforms.

After the war Wright re-joined Brooke Bond, which put him on a troopship to Calcutta and on to Ceylon, where he was to become senior tea buyer. His sojourn in the Indian subcontinent lasted 15 years, by the end of which he had built the company into Ceylon's premier exporter and had opened Trincomalee, in the north of the island far from the politically turbulent capital, as a tea-shipping port. By 1962 Sri Lanka (as Ceylon had become) exported nearly one-third of the world's tea.

He returned to England in 1963 to join the board and to direct Brooke Bond's global tea buying and planting responsibilities. He developed tea growing in East Africa and began to develop instant tea as a commercial product.

He also represented the tea trade to governmental organisations such as the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, the International Standards Organisation, and the British Standards Institute. By 1971 he had been president of the Tea Buyers' Association, and chairman of the Tea Trade Committee and of the Annual Tea Trade Dinner. He founded the Tea Trade Council and was its chairman in its early years, helping to promote the benefits of tea drinking. His own favourite tippie, however, was Irish whiskey.

Wright was an exemplary product of his generation, modest, private, courteous and charming, yet with the leader's gift of being able to enthuse and motivate those around him.

He died on 10 May 2008 aged 92.

I'm indebted to the Telegraph obituary for much of the above – see <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/2032987/Commander-Jake-Wright.html>