

= Robert Peverell Hichens =

Lieutenant Commander Robert Peverell Hichens DSO * DSC * * RNVR (2 March 1909 ? 13 April 1943) was the most highly decorated officer of the Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve (RNVR) , being awarded two Distinguished Service Orders , three Distinguished Service Crosses and three Mentions in Despatches . He was also recommended for a Victoria Cross after being killed in action in April 1943 .

Before the Second World War , Hichens was a keen sportsman who rowed for Magdalen College , Oxford , and competed in the Double sculls at the Henley Regatta . He also competed in International Fourteen sailing events and three times participated in the Fastnet race . On land he raced in hill climbing events in Somerset and also entered the 24 Hours of Le Mans race three times . During the Second World War , he rose in rank to become a lieutenant commander and commanded the 6th Motor Gun Boat Flotilla and later the 8th Motor Gun Boat Flotilla .

= = Early life = =

Robert Peverell Hichens was born 2 March 1909 , the son of Doctor Peverell Smythe Hichens and Constance Sawbridge Hichens . He spent his early life in Northampton , until the start of the Great War when his father ? an officer in a Territorial Army unit of the Royal Army Medical Corps ? was sent to France , and the rest of the family moved to St Mawes in Cornwall . It was when living in Cornwall that Hichens and his sister Loveday were taught how to sail , eventually sailing their dinghy Arethusa on Carrick Roads .

= = = Education = = =

In 1919 , following the Great War , the family returned to the Northampton area , and Hichens was sent to a prep school nearby until 1921 , when he was enrolled in Marlborough College . In 1922 , Hichens ' father , by now a consulting physician at Northampton General hospital , retired and the family moved to Guernsey in the Channel Islands , purchasing Havelet House just outside Saint Peter Port . Hichens entered Magdalen College , Oxford , to read law in 1927 . A keen sportsman , he started rowing and within six months was in the Magdalen second eight ; by the following year he made the first eight as stroke oarsman . In the Eights Week races (the annual summer Head of the River Race at Oxford) , when Hichens was at Magdalen , they came third in 1928 , sixth in 1929 and eighth in 1930 , which was the college 's lowest position in the race since 1876 . While at university he also joined the Officers Training Corps , receiving a commission as second lieutenant in the infantry on 2 June 1929 . In 1929 , the Hichens family had purchased Bodrennick House at Flushing , Cornwall , which they moved into in 1930 , after the death of Hichens ' father .

= = = Married life = = =

Robert Hichens met his future wife , Catherine Gilbert Enys of Flushing , Cornwall , in 1928 ; they were married at St Gluvias church , Penryn , Cornwall , in April 1931 . The following year he joined a firm of solicitors , Reginald Rodgers and son of Falmouth , Cornwall , as an articled clerk to be instructed as a solicitor . Hichens also trained in London with Mackrell 's of Bedford Square ; it was when working in London that he competed at the Henley Regatta in the Double sculls . In June 1933 , after his mother 's death , Hichens inherited half of his father 's estate and Bodrennick House , and at the same time completed his articles . He became a junior partner with Reginald Rodgers on 1 January 1934 . Robert and Catherine had two sons : Robert , born in 1932 , and Anthony , born in 1936 .

= = = Competitive sailing = = =

During this time Hichens had continued to sail ; he joined the Royal Cornish Yacht Club and started

to race in International Fourteen events in his own dinghies called Venture and Venture II . He competed in the Fowey Regatta and the Prince of Wales Cup , coming fifth on the River Clyde in 1936 . He also entered the competition at Lowestoft in 1937 and at Falmouth in 1938 . Hichens had also taken up offshore yacht racing and was a member of the Royal Ocean Racing Club , competed three times in the Fastnet race , and crewed in the Channel race in June 1939 .

= = = Motor racing = = =

In 1935 , he purchased a 1 @. @ 4 litre Aston Martin touring car and a Riley which he used to compete in hill climbs at Beggars Roost in Somerset . Then in 1936 , he purchased a 2 @- @ litre Aston Martin Speed Model ? one of six built for the Ulster TT and 24 Hours of Le Mans race that year . With assistance from Aston Martin he entered the car for the 1937 24 Hours of Le Mans , with Mortimer Morris @- @ Goodall as his co @- @ driver . They finished eleventh place overall but did win the Rudge Whitworth Cup . They competed again in the 1938 24 Hours of Le Mans but did not finish . They returned for the 1939 24 Hours of Le Mans where they finished twelfth .

= = Second World War = =

Robert Hichens applied to transfer from the Territorial Army to the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve (RNVR) in the summer of 1930 , and eventually transferred to the Royal Naval Volunteer Supplementary Reserve in 1936 , which was formed from yachtsmen sufficiently knowledgeable about the sea to be considered suitable for a commission . After the declaration of war he was ordered to join the training depot HMS King Alfred on 27 October 1939 , and after passing an interview and medical was promoted to sub lieutenant RNVR , completing his training in six weeks instead of the normal three months .

= = = Phoney war and Dunkirk = = =

Having completed training in December 1939 , he was promoted to lieutenant and appointed to HMS Halcyon , part of the 5th Minesweeping Flotilla and later the 4th Minesweeping Flotilla . He moved ship to HMS Niger in April 1940 , during the Phoney war period both flotillas were kept busy minesweeping in the North Sea and the only action seen was on 15 May 1940 , when HMS Hussar was holed by a German bomber . On 29 May 1940 , Hichens was informed that the British Expeditionary Force were being evacuated from Dunkirk in Operation Dynamo and that Niger would be leaving to assist . Arriving off Dunkirk on 31 May , Hichens organised the small boats and yachts used to evacuate the army from the Dunkirk jetty . When Niger was ordered home with a full complement of soldiers , Hichens asked to be left behind to continue with the evacuation . He was given permission but also informed he would have to find his own way home . Arriving back in Dover on the yacht Chico he rejoined Niger on 1 June . HMS Niger returned to Dunkirk another three times , Hichens once more went ashore to arrange the evacuation before the end of the operation . For his work on the beaches in the withdrawal of the Allied armies from Dunkirk , Hichens was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross (DSC) .

= = = Coastal forces = = =

Having asked for a transfer to Coastal Forces Hichens was sent to HMS Osprey at Portland for training on Motor Anti @- @ Submarine Boats (MASB) . He was appointed to his first command , MASB 16 , on 4 November 1940 , which he held until 18 November 1940 , when he was appointed commander of MASB 18 . His final MASB command was MASB 14 , which he took up 23 December 1940 . These boats were lightly armed with two twin Vickers .50 machine guns and depth charges and had a top speed of 40 knots .

In January 1941 , Hichens was given a new command , Motor Gun Boat 64 , becoming the first RNVR officer to command a MGB , and the only RNVR crewed boat in the 6th MGB Flotilla . It was

when in command of MGB 64 that Hichens got his nickname Hitch . As each boat needed to select a radio call sign , Hichens could not think of anything suitable and Lieutenant Arty Shaw suggested Hitch , which stuck and remained with him for the rest of his time with the coastal forces .

The 6th MGB Flotilla was based at HMS Beehive in Felixstowe from April 1941 , where they were tasked to engage German E boats raiding east coast convoys . At this stage in the war MGBs were armed with a mixture of weapons , which could be Lewis machine guns , Vickers machine guns , Oerlikon 20 mm cannon or four barrelled Boulton Paul gun turrets . The armament was soon standardized with two twin Vickers .50 machine guns each side of the bridge , an Oerlikon 20 mm cannon mounted aft , and depth charges . The boats had a crew of 18 , consisting of two officers , two petty officers and 14 ratings .

= = = Flotilla commander = = =

When Robert Hichens was appointed senior officer in command of the 6th MGB Flotilla from September 1941 , he became the first RNVR officer to command a flotilla in the Second World War . Along with the new command came a promotion to lieutenant commander .

As flotilla commander his first successful action took place the night of 19 / 20 November 1941 , when his flotilla was ordered to patrol 10 miles (16 km) off the Hook of Holland to engage E boats returning to base . The flotilla engaged five E boats , causing damage to all five boats , damaging two severely and forcing them to disperse . One E boat was later found abandoned by the crew and boarded . This was the first E boat captured and Hichens ' crew obtained valuable information and equipment before the boat sank . For this action Hichens was awarded a Bar to his DSC , the citation noting his " ... [c] oolness skill and readiness when in action against enemy E boats sinking one and damaging others " . Other members of the flotilla were awarded one Distinguished Service Medal (DSM) and five others were Mentioned in Dispatches (MID) for the action .

The flotilla 's second success was the night of 19 / 20 December 1941 , again in the North Sea off the Dutch coast , when two boats engaged two R boats and one E boat . They passed twice at high speed before losing contact , but twice during the night they located them and eventually carried out depth charge attacks . Both Hichens and the commander of the other boat received a MID for this action .

The third major action Hichens was involved in during this period was the action during the night of 21 / 22 April 1942 , off Ostend , when they engaged six E boats , forcing the superior force to scatter and run for port after severely damaging one boat and causing slight damage to the others . After this action the E boats were moved to a safer harbour to operate from . Hichens was awarded a Distinguished Service Order (DSO) following this engagement .

= = = 8th MGB Flotilla = = =

Hichens was next appointed commander of the 8th MGB Flotilla . These new boats were armed with a twin Oerlikon mount aft , a QF 2 @-@ pounder Mark XIV forward , twin Lewis or later twin Vickers machine guns either side of the bridge and depth charges . The flotilla was moved to Dartmouth , Devon in July 1942 . The first action they were involved in was during the night of 14 / 15 July . Ordered to engage E Boats using Cherbourg as a base they found a convoy of naval trawlers escorting a small tanker . The flotilla engaged the two rear escort trawlers and carried out a depth charge attack . The tanker was last seen to be on fire as the flotilla reformed off Alderney . After this action Hichens was awarded a Bar to his DSO . Both the DSO and the Bar were presented during the same investiture at Buckingham Palace on 22 September 1942 , while other members of the flotilla were awarded a Conspicuous Gallantry Medal and four MID's for the action .

The flotilla was next in action during the night 29 / 30 July again off Ostend , when the flotilla in company with two Motor Torpedo Boats (MTB) engaged a convoy of three Flak trawlers and two merchant ships . One of the merchant ships was hit by torpedoes from the MTBs while the MGBs engaged the other by dropping depth charges . With those ships destroyed they then engaged the Flak trawlers .

During the night 1 / 2 August , under orders to patrol north west of Guernsey , the flotilla again located enemy shipping . Following them towards the port of Cherbourg they silently passed a German torpedo boat lying at anchor , and located four E boats waiting to enter harbour . Having caught them by surprise they opened fire on the stationary boats and after a short engagement withdrew leaving two of the enemy boats on fire . For this action Hitchens received a second MID , while other members of the flotilla were awarded a DSC , two DSMs and four MIDs .

The flotilla was ordered back to Felixstowe in Autumn 1942 . Their first contact with the enemy was on the night 14 / 15 September when they engaged a small convoy off the Hook of Holland . They followed a convoy that was escorted by four Flak trawlers almost into harbour before inflicting considerable damage to it . For this , Hitchens was awarded a second Bar to his DSC . Other members of the flotilla were awarded a DSC , two DSMs and a MID .

Hitchens , now the recipient of two DSOs , three DSCs and two MIDs , was offered promotion to commander in command of HMS Bee at Weymouth , Dorset and a training post ashore . Feeling unsuited for such a role , he declined and remained commander of the 8th MGB flotilla .

= = = Casualties = = =

Hitchens lost the first boat under his command during the night action 2 / 3 October 1942 . Engaging four trawlers MGB 78 went in for a depth charge attack and was lost to enemy fire . Another boat , MGB 76 , was lost during the night of 5 / 6 October 1942 , when the flotilla was ambushed by two German torpedo boats and a number of E boats .

The winter months of 1942 ? 43 were uneventful , and Hitchens started to write his unfinished account of the war . We fought them in Gunboats was published posthumously in 1944 .

The flotilla , accompanied by four MTBs and escorting mine laying Motor Launches (ML) , were next in action over the night of 27 / 28 February 1943 . The mixed flotilla engaged a convoy escorted by two trawlers and a minesweeper , and lost MGB 79 to enemy fire . Hitchens closed with the stricken boat , which was on fire , to remove the crew . They managed to rescue seven of the crew before being forced to withdraw under fire . Hitchens ' own boat , MGB 77 , was also set on fire during the rescue .

On the night of 12 / 13 April 1943 , the flotilla was ordered to escort mine laying MLs off the Dutch coast . Detecting two trawlers they engaged them leaving one on fire , but as they withdrew MGB 77 was hit , killing Hitchens outright and wounding three others on the bridge . Hitchens received a posthumous MID for these actions .

= = Victoria Cross recommendation = =

Hitchens was recommended for the Victoria Cross for his actions during the night of 27 / 28 February . When informed by his commanding officer , Commander Kerr , of the intention to recommend him , Hitchens requested that the recommendation be dropped as he now felt he had endangered two of the boats in the flotilla trying to rescue his friends . Kerr , respecting his views , dropped the recommendation , only for it to be resubmitted six weeks later after his death . The recommendation was endorsed by Commander Kerr , Admiral Lyon (the Commander @-@ in @-@ chief at Nore) and Rear Admiral Rogers (the Flag officer in charge at Harwich) . The recommendation was rejected by the Admiralty , citing the same reasons Hitchens had himself given .