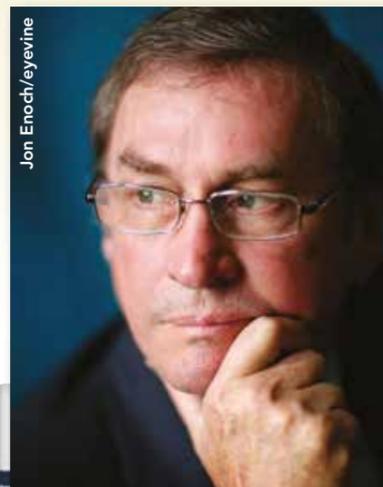


# LEADING SEAMAN JAMES MAGENNIS VC

They had placed their charges on the enemy warship and were about to make their escape when they found that one of their limpet carriers had not released. Though he was exhausted and his suit was leaking after laying his charges, one of the divers volunteered to leave the midget submarine again. In the first of a new regular series examining his “Hero of the Month”, Lord Ashcroft reveals the remarkable actions of Acting Leading Seaman James Magennis VC.



Jon Enoch/eyevine

It was on Monday, 30 July 1945, just a week before the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, that the four-man crew from the Royal Navy’s midget submarine XE.3 was given its final orders. They were one element of a two-pronged attack upon Japanese warships. Their part in the mission, Operation *Struggle*, was to sink the Japanese cruiser *Takao*, a 10,000-ton warship that was moored in the Johore Straits, off Singapore, whilst the target of XE.1 was another heavy cruiser, *Myōkō*.<sup>1</sup> Both vessels had not been to sea for some time, but still presented a very real threat to Allied shipping.

This task would be fraught with danger as they would have to negotiate treacherous seas, and then slip out again unnoticed before their explosives detonated. The four men who formed the crew of XE.3 were Lieutenant Ian “Tich” Fraser, who was in command of the submarine, Sub-Lieutenant William James Lanyon Smith RNZVR, Engine Room Artificer Third Class Charles Alfred Reed, and Acting Leading Seaman James Magennis, the diver who would be tasked with attaching limpet mines to the hull of the enemy ship.

XE.3 was towed to the area by the conventional submarine HMS *Stygian*, before slipping its tow at 23.00 hours on 30 July 1945, the change-over from passage to operational crews having been completed five hours

**ABOVE:** The view looking down through the hatch into the Wet and Dry Compartment of the midget submarine XE.3 – as used by Acting Leading Seaman James Magennis during Operation *Struggle*. (Royal Navy Submarine Museum)

**RIGHT:** The diving suit worn by Leading Seaman James Magennis during his attack on the cruiser *Takao* on 31 July 1945. The suit is on display in the Extraordinary Heroes exhibition in the Lord Ashcroft Gallery at the Imperial War Museum in London.



Lord Ashcroft’s “Hero of the Month”



**ABOVE LEFT:** A group photograph of XE-3 crew members, including members of the passage and operational crews of XE.3 during the attack on Singapore. Amongst those known to be in the picture are Able Seaman Ernest Dee (passage crew), Stoker "Spike" Hughes (passage crew), Engine Room Artificer Charles Reed (operational crew), Engine Room Artificer Albert Nairn (passage crew) and Leading Seaman James Magennis. The latter is sat in the front of the group. (Royal Navy Submarine Museum)

**ABOVE RIGHT:** A portrait of Leading Seaman James Joseph Magennis. Magennis was drafted into the submarine service in December 1942, volunteering for "special and hazardous duties" the following March.

**BELOW LEFT:** XE-3 crew members pictured aboard HMS *Bonaventure*, prior to Operation *Struggle*, at Honolulu in April 1945. One of the men pictured is Engine Room Artificer Third Class Charles Alfred Reed, who can be seen in the back row fourth from the right (to his left is Engine Room Artificer "Ginger" Coles). (Courtesy of Vernon "Ginger" Coles)

earlier.<sup>2</sup> Ahead was a perilous forty-mile journey through wrecks, minefields, listening posts and surface patrols. Conditions in the midget submarine were cramped, stuffy and uncomfortable although Fraser, at just five-feet-four inches tall (hence his nickname), could stand up inside without stooping.

"We were approaching the boom on the surface in the darkness when we came on a Japanese ship escorted by a small vessel that passed so close to us that

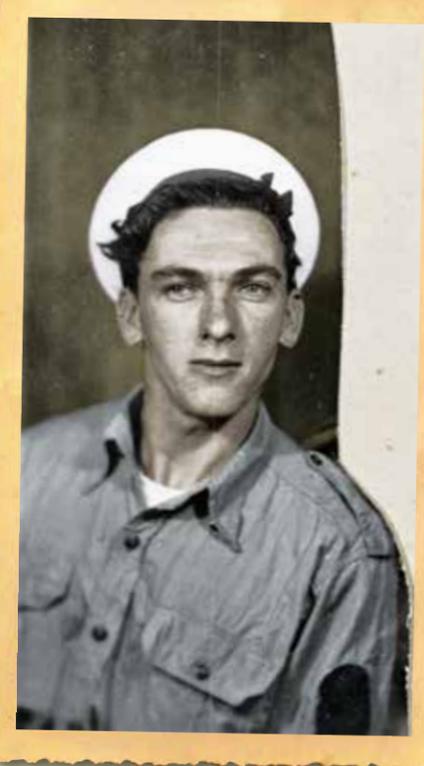
we were forced to dive," recalled Fraser. "Continuing under water we found, when daylight came, that we had been sitting in a Japanese controlled minefield for more than an hour!

"At 10.30am we passed the 'gate' – an old vessel on which I could see Japanese running about, although they did not suspect our presence."<sup>3</sup>

After thirteen-and-a-half hours, during which their journey had gone without a hitch, XE.3's target was finally sighted at 12.30 hours on 31 July. The *Takao*, it was noted, was heavily camouflaged and lying in shallow waters very close inshore with its bows pointing away from Singapore Island. In turn, each member of the crew took the opportunity to examine their quarry through the periscope.

At 13.52 hours, Fraser began his approach and at 15.03 hours – on his second attempt – he slid XE.3 under *Takao*.

"You go under very slowly," recalled



Fraser himself, "as slow as you possibly can go. There's a porthole in the top of the submarine which you can look through and its bright daylight and then you suddenly see it getting darker. And you suddenly see the plates of the hull with the weeds hanging down and the rivet holes, the rivets, all that sort of thing. You then stop the submarine, give it a little bit astern, and stop dead."<sup>4</sup>



\*  
Twenty-five-year-old

Magennis, who hailed from a working class West Belfast family, had been a career sailor who had volunteered three years earlier for "special and hazardous duties". Affectionately known as "Mick" to his comrades, he now faced the most daring operation of his career. Magennis set out to exit the "wet and dry compartment" which could either be flooded or pumped to let a diver out or back into the midget submarine. However, the "hatch could not be fully opened because XE.3 was tightly jammed under the target, and Magennis had to squeeze himself through the narrow space available".

Soon he had begun his task of attaching limpet mines to the enemy ship. However, he had to chip away at barnacles in order to attach the magnetic explosives. Furthermore, the magnets were inexplicably weak so that, time and again, Magennis had to swim to retrieve them.

Eventually, despite a leak in his oxygen line, Magennis had attached six limpet mines to *Takao's* hull before returning, exhausted, to the midget submarine. It was almost impossible for him to close the



**ABOVE LEFT:** The target for the crew of XE.3 – the Imperial Japanese Navy's heavy cruiser *Takao*. *Takao* was launched on 12 May 1930, the lead ship in her class, all of which have been referred to as some of the most heavily armed cruisers ever built.

**ABOVE RIGHT:** A close up of part of the superstructure of IJN *Takao*. The cruiser was captured by British forces when the naval base in Singapore was reoccupied following the Japanese surrender. It was towed to the Strait of Malacca and sunk on 19 October 1946, having been used as a target by HMS *Newfoundland*. (US Navy Historical Center)

**BELOW LEFT:** A map of the Johore Strait showing the attack on IJN *Takao* by XE.3.

**BELOW RIGHT:** Two naval Victoria Cross holders: Leading Seaman James Magennis VC (left) standing beside Lieutenant Ian "Tich" Fraser VC, DSC, RNR. Fraser, who after the war became a Justice of the Peace, remained in the Royal Naval Reserve until December 1965, when he retired as a lieutenant commander. He died in Wallasey on 1 September 2008, aged eighty-seven.

**BOTTOM:** A rare shot of XE.3 underway on the surface. An improved version of the earlier X-craft, the XE-craft carried a crew of four, typically a Lieutenant in command, a Sub-Lieutenant as deputy, an Engine Room Artificer in charge of the mechanical side and a Seaman or Leading Seaman. At least one of them was qualified as a diver. (Royal Navy Submarine Museum)



hatch because his hands had been shredded from tackling the barnacles.

Magennis later said of this part of the operation: "My first impression was how murky the water was. The bottom of the target resembled something like an underwater jungle and I had to clear a patch of undergrowth and barnacles off six places in order to make sure the magnetic limpets would stick on. Getting them on was quite like my old training days when I had stuck many dummies [dummy bombs] under our own ship. It took me about three quarters of an hour altogether before I got back to XE.3."

Fraser now had to release two side charges from his craft, each containing two tons of Amatol, a high explosive. The port charge slipped away cleanly but the starboard one stuck to the midget submarine. Furthermore, on a falling tide XE.3 had become wedged beneath *Takao* and would not budge.

"We were in a very narrow hole under this thing," added Fraser. "There was

hardly any room, and the tide had gone out a foot or so and the ship had just sunk down and we just couldn't move."<sup>5</sup>

For more than an hour, the crew struggled with XE.3's controls to break free. Under Fraser's instructions, the craft went full astern and full ahead, pumped into tanks and blew out of them and "used every means that the collective ingenuity of four experienced X-craft crew could call to mind", but to no avail. It looked as if the midget submarine and its crew would be blown to pieces by their own explosives. There were only six hours before the charges went off.

Then, suddenly, the midget submarine shot backwards, out of control, surged towards the surface and caused a large splash just fifty yards from the cruiser. Fortunately, none of the Japanese crew observed what had happened and XE.3 dived back under the surface. Alarminglly,





**ABOVE LEFT:** This memorial to Magennis was unveiled in Belfast in 1999 following a campaign led by George Fleming, the author of his biography, *Magennis VC*. Six years later, a mural commemorating Magennis on the sixtieth anniversary of VJ Day was also unveiled in the city. (Courtesy of William Murphy)

**ABOVE RIGHT:** Magennis wearing his Victoria Cross. He left the Royal Navy in 1949.

**BELOW:** Three submariner VC holders being interviewed. From left to right are Lieutenant Ian Fraser, Leading Seaman James Magennis and Lieutenant Basil Charles Godfrey Place VC. The latter was awarded his VC for his actions as commander of the X-craft X-7 during the attack on *Tirpitz* in September 1943. Magennis had formed part of the passage crew for X-7 during the mission, work for which he was Mentioned in Despatches. (Royal Navy Submarine Museum)



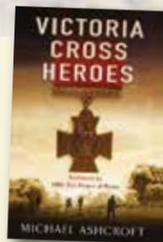
were forced into the limelight," she said. "We lived beyond our means because it seemed the only thing to do." The couple, who married in 1946, had four sons, though one, David, died young in a car accident.

Magennis moved to Yorkshire in 1955, where he worked as an electrician, having long since squandered his riches. He died from lung cancer while living in Halifax, Yorkshire, on 12 February 1986, aged sixty-six.

"When his gallantry and service medals came up for sale later that year, I was able to fulfill a childhood ambition to purchase a VC, Britain and the Commonwealth's premier medal for gallantry in the face of the enemy.

#### VICTORIA CROSS HEROES

Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC is a Conservative peer, businessman, philanthropist and author. The story behind the Magennis and Fraser VCs appears in his book *Victoria Cross Heroes*. For more information visit: [www.victoriacrossheroes.com](http://www.victoriacrossheroes.com)  
The Magennis and Fraser VCs, along with the remainder of Lord Ashcroft's VC collection, are on public display at the Imperial War Museum (though the museum is closed for refurbishment work until July 2013). For more information visit: [www.iwm.org.uk/heroes](http://www.iwm.org.uk/heroes)



"On a warm summer's day – 3 July 1986 – at Sotheby's auction in London, I successfully, but anonymously, secured Magennis' decorations for a hammer price of £29,000, plus a buyer's premium. Little did I know then that I would, over the next three decades, add another 178 VCs to that first purchase, thereby building the largest collection of such decorations in the world."

"In 1988 I took advantage of the opportunity of buying Fraser's VC, thereby taking great pleasure in 'reuniting' the two decorations for the first time since they were awarded in 1945." ■

#### NOTES:

1. Some accounts state that the warship attacked by XE.1 was the cruiser *Nachi*. *Nachi* was in fact was the second of four *Myōkō*-class heavy cruisers constructed for the Imperial Japanese Navy, and it was in fact *Myōkō* that was anchored in the Johore Strait at the time of Operation *Struggle*.
2. C.E.T. Warren and James Benson, *Above Us The Waves* (Harrap & Co., London, 1953), p.221.
3. *The War Illustrated*, Volume 9, Nol.224, 18 January 1946, p.601.
4. Interview with Lieutenant-Commander Ian Edward Fraser VC, DSC, RD & Bar, JP, Imperial War Museum Sound Archive, reference 9822.
5. Quoted in Roderick Bailey, *Forgotten Voices: Victoria Cross* (Ebury Press, London, 2011), p.331.
6. C.E.T. Warren and James Benson, *Ibid*, p.227.

