

## THE TIMES – MONDAY JUNE 7 1999

### LIEUTENANT-COMMANDER CANON RUPERT LONSDALE



Lieutenant-Commander Canon Rupert Lonsdale, wartime submariner, died on April 25 aged 93. He was born on May 5, 1905.

RUPERT LONSDALE had the unhappy distinction of being the only British warship captain to have surrendered his ship to the enemy in the Second World War.

Appointed captain of the minelaying submarine Seal in November 1938 (his second command). Lonsdale was on his way to the China station when war broke out, his first patrol being against Axis shipping in the Red Sea.

The demands of the tragically unsuccessful Norwegian campaign brought about Seal's redeployment to northern waters in early 1940. Lonsdale was awarded a mention in despatches for his part in convoy protection operations, but it was Seal's useful capability as a minelayer which was the reason for his venture deep into the enemy-controlled waters of the Skagerrak between Denmark and Sweden.

On May 4, despite having been damaged by air attack, Lonsdale pressed on and laid his fifty mines in the required place - they subsequently sank four ships - and was making a return against opposition when one of his hydroplanes caught on a German mine-mooring wire. The subsequent explosion sent Seal to the bottom with serious flooding of the after compartments.

Lonsdale's leadership had created a gallant and professional ship's company, but the next 23 hours were to test the bravest hearts. The lifeblood of a submerged submarine is battery power; her crew depend upon breathable air, and to get to the surface the submarine needs large quantities of compressed air to blow seawater from the ballast tanks.

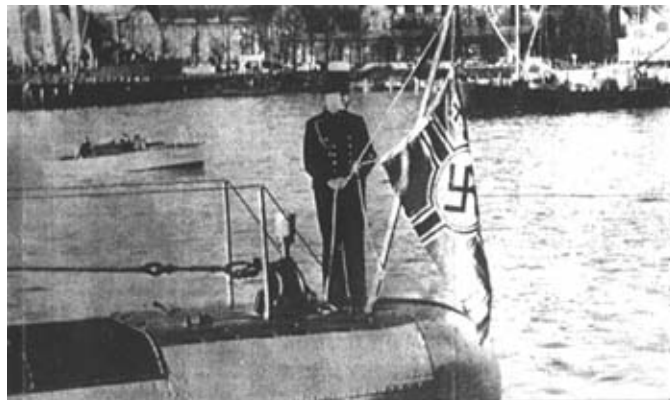
After a wait until dark of ten hours, three separate attempts were made to surface, including releasing the 11-ton drop keel, a device that once released would prevent the submarine from diving again. Under dim light from failing batteries, foul atmosphere from electrical short-circuits and carbon dioxide poisoning which affected everyone's judgment, various emergency measures

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were taken, without effect. No one was in a condition to operate the Davis individual escape system without risking a flood of the whole submarine.

Lonsdale was known by his men as "religious, but doesn't push it". At this desperate point, he called a prayer meeting in the control room, and in a firm and clear voice recited the Lord's Prayer and a prayer of his own. Getting as many men as were able to climb the steep slope towards the bow, blowing tanks and using motors for one last attempt, he found his prayers answered by Seal unsticking and rising to the surface. Once there, however, it was clear that the steering gear was unusable and the proposed dash to Swedish waters and internment impossible.

Immobilised, Seal was in due course spotted by a German Arado seaplane which attacked her with bombs and machinegunned the conning tower, piercing the ballast tanks with armour-piercing cannon shells. After returning machinegun fire, Lonsdale realised that the situation was hopeless, the Arado having been reinforced by another, as well as a Heinkel bomber. Waving the white wardroom tablecloth in capitulation, he subsequently swam over to the seaplane and surrendered his submarine to a Lieutenant Schmidt, the captain of the aircraft.



**The Nazi swastika is hoisted on the submarine Seal in Kiel harbour, after Lieutenant-Commander Lonsdale's surrender**

Lonsdale and his men were made prisoners of war. Seal, with all her secret equipment broken up or thrown overboard, was towed to Kiel and was eventually scuttled in 1945.

For his conduct in support of other PoWs, Lonsdale was awarded a second mention in dispatches. On repatriation, he faced to the customary courtmartial of any captain who loses his ship. He was acquitted with honour, the president of the court personally handing his sword back to him, and was greeted outside the courtroom by pats on the back from many of the officers and men who had served with him. Some years later, when dedicating the

cricket pavilion at Seal's "twinned" village of Seal in Kent, he was proud to be able to record the support of some forty of his old shipmates.

Rupert Philip Lonsdale joined the Navy in 1919 at Dartmouth, qualifying as a submarine captain in 1934. After the war he commanded a minesweeper, retiring in 1947 to join the Church. Training at Ridley Hall, he was ordained priest in 1949. After a curacy at Rowner in Hampshire, he became vicar of Morden-with-Almer in Dorset in 1951. Two years later he went to Kenya and was chaplain of the Uasin-Gishu district until 1958. He returned to England as rector of Bentworth-cum-Shalden in the Winchester diocese, but went back to Kenya for a further four years in 1961. becoming a canon of Maseno in 1964. From 1965 until his retirement in 1970 he was vicar of Thomham with Titchwell in Norfolk; he then spent three years as chaplain of Puerto de la Cruz in Tenerife.

He is survived by his second wife Ethné and by the son of his first marriage, his first wife having died in 1938.

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