

## Petty Officer Walter Roland Frederick (Tom) JAMES

Service number D/JX 128319  
Royal Navy  
HM Submarine P615  
Killed in action on 18 April 1943, aged 33

Born in Wells in 1910, Tom joined the Royal Navy as a boy seaman in 1926. In 1933 he joined the submarine service. He married in 1938 and they had one daughter. When the war started he was serving on HM Submarine Regent in Hong Kong, which in 1940 moved to the Mediterranean. Tom was 'Mentioned in Despatches' for his service there. He next served on the P614 and P615, both of which provided escort to Arctic convoys including the ill-fated PQ 17. When he died he was serving on the P615, which was sunk by a German U-boat 100 miles southwest of Freetown.



HM Submarine P615

Photograph by a Royal Navy official photographer © IWM FL 20358  
(<https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205121577>)

Tom was born in Wells on 3 September 1910 to Emily Harriet James. On 21 September he was baptised in St Thomas' Church. Tom and his mother were then living with her married sister, Bessie Jacobs, at 46, St Thomas Street.

Towards the end of 1919, Emily married Charles Ball, a coal merchant and a widower with two children. Emily and Charles had two children of their own and they lived at 35, St Thomas Street.

After leaving school Tom worked as a grocer's errand boy. Then on 5 October 1926, aged 16, he joined the Royal Navy as a Boy 2<sup>nd</sup> Class, and went to the training ship HMS Impregnable at Devonport.

On 24 February 1927, his mother died of pleurisy after influenza. Sadly Tom was not able to attend the funeral. When he was on leave in Wells he would stay with his Aunt Bessie at 10, Tor Street. Bessie's son Freddie also died in the Royal Navy during the war, as did Tom's other cousin, Ronald Griffin.

On his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, while serving on the minelaying cruiser HMS Adventure, Tom enlisted for 12 years and became an Ordinary Seaman. In 1933 he joined the submarine service and served in a number of different boats, some in UK waters and some in the Mediterranean. On 9 October 1937, he became a Leading Torpedo Operator.

In 1938, Tom married a Dorset girl, Kathleen Palmer Wilson, in Wells. They had one child, Jennifer Kathleen, who was born in 1939. In September 1939, Kathleen and Jennifer were living in lodgings at 12, Ventnor Road, Portland.

At the start of the war Tom was serving on HM Submarine Regent in Hong Kong as part of the 4<sup>th</sup> Submarine Flotilla which comprised three other Rainbow-class submarines and the depot ship HMS Medway. On 2 April 1940, the 4<sup>th</sup> Flotilla left Hong Kong, arriving in Alexandria on 3 May.

On its first patrol the Regent laid mines off the North African coast. It then went on patrols in the Eastern Mediterranean until the end of 1940 and sank two Italian merchant ships. The *Supplement to the London Gazette* of 5 May 1942 announced that Tom had been 'Mentioned in Despatches' for "Daring, enterprise and devotion to duty in successful patrols in H.M. Submarines" for his service at this time.

We know that on 27 March 1941 Tom was serving in HM Submarine P614 and that when he died on 18 April 1943 he was serving in her sister submarine the P615, but we do not know when he transferred to the P615. Both submarines were built in Barrow-in-Furness and both were launched in late 1940. In early 1942, they left Barrow within a month of each other to be commissioned into the Royal Navy. Up until Tom's last voyage, both submarines acted as escorts for the Arctic convoys to Russia, usually together. So no matter which boat he was on, he would have been on these patrols.

On 18 May 1942, P614 sailed from Lerwick on her first war patrol. She patrolled in the Norwegian Sea to provide cover for convoy PQ 16 bound for Northern Russia and for the returning convoy QP 12. On 31 May 1942 she arrived back at Lerwick.

The P615's first war patrol, and the P614's second, was as part of the escort to the ill-fated Arctic convoy PQ 17. The convoy left Reykjavik, Iceland, on 27 June 1942, destined for the port of Archangel in Russia. Because of the perceived threat from German surface ships, including the battleship Tirpitz, on 4 July the order was given to withdraw the escort and to scatter the convoy. The 37 merchant ships then fell prey to German aircraft and U-boats. Only 11 reached Russia. P614 and P615 arrived at Polyarnoe, in northern Russia, close to the Finnish border, on 8 July. After 13 days in Russia they left and arrived in Lerwick on 29 July.

On their next patrol they both departed from Seidisfjord, Iceland, on 8 Sep 1942, and rendezvoused with the Russian-bound convoy PQ 18 at sea. The two submarines did not go all the way to Russia; instead they transferred to the homecoming QP 14 convoy, and arrived at Lerwick on 25 September 1942.

In addition to their war patrols and a lot of training, the P614 and P615 also took part in the making of the 1943 film *We Dive at Dawn* starring John Mills. Both were stand-ins for John Mills' submarine HMS Sea Tiger.

On 11 December 1942, the P615 left Scotland bound for Freetown, Sierra Leone, and we know that by now Tom had to be aboard as this was its last voyage. The P615 arrived at Falmouth on 13 December to refuel and set off again on the 19<sup>th</sup>. She arrived at Freetown on 6 January 1943, and on the 17<sup>th</sup> departed for Simonstown, South Africa, escorted by a British minesweeper. This description of Tom's death is taken from the website *uboat.net* (<https://uboat.net/>):

U-123 spotted both vessels at 03.44 hours and missed them with two spreads of two torpedoes at 05.34 and 06.47 hours, one of the torpedo tracks was sighted by the escort, but was put down to a porpoise. At 11.01 hours, a merchant vessel was sighted and at 11.53 hours the U-boat fired one torpedo at the minesweeper on station about 300 yards off the submarine's starboard quarter, but missed. At 11.54 hours, a spread of two torpedoes was fired at the submarine, which was hit by one of them on the starboard side, exploded and sank immediately about 100 miles southwest of Freetown. The commander, six officers and 37 ratings were lost.

Tom has no known grave other than the wreck of the P615 but is commemorated on the Plymouth Naval Memorial, Panel 78, Column 2. He is also remembered on the rolls of honour at Wells Town Hall and Wells Cemetery.

Tom's wife Kathleen never remarried and died in Dorset in 2003.