

Stoker 1st Class Raymond Douglas STEVENS

Service number D/KX 137794

Royal Navy

HMS Hardy

Killed in action 30 January 1944, aged 21

Born in Wells, Raymond joined the Royal Navy and served on HMS Hardy. In January 1944, HMS Hardy was part of the escort for Arctic convoy JW 56B to Russia. Raymond died when his ship was torpedoed by a German U-boat in the Barents Sea, 185 miles north of Norway.



HMS Hardy

Photograph by Royal Navy official photographer, © IWM FL 9572

<https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205120774>

Raymond was born in Wells on 8 September 1922 to William Stevens and Frances Augusta Sophia née Rayfield. He had an elder sister Dorothy who had been born two years earlier.

We know nothing about Raymond's early life. There is no mention of him in the *Wells Journal*.

In September 1939 the family lived at 2, Greens Place, Southover. Raymond's father was working as a nurse in a mental hospital, probably Mendip Hospital, and his sister was working as a laundry packer. Two years later, Dorothy married Herbert Gibson in Wells. After the war Raymond's parents moved to Chandler's Ford, Hampshire.

Raymond was a few days off being 17 when the war started, and so it is likely that he joined the Navy in later 1940 or early 1941, but other than the name of the ship that he died on, we know nothing about his service. Given that HMS Hardy was only a few months old when she was sunk, it seems likely that Raymond had been with her since she was commissioned in August 1943, and perhaps since she was launched in March.

HMS Hardy¹ (R 08) was a V-Class Fleet Destroyer, fitted for use as Flotilla Leader in Arctic waters. After completing her acceptance trials she was commissioned into the Royal Navy on 14 August

¹ The information about HMS Hardy is taken from www.naval-history.net, www.uboaat.net, and <https://en.wikipedia.org>.

1943. In September she joined the Home Fleet at Scapa Flow as part of the 26th Destroyer Flotilla. Her first operational patrol was on 14 October when she and four other destroyers escorted the battleship HMS Anson to Spitsbergen with a relief garrison.

Convoy JW 54B departed Loch Ewe on 22 November 1943, and three days later, it was joined by an escort of eight Home Fleet destroyers, led by HMS Hardy. On 3 December, after an uneventful passage over the Norwegian and Barents Seas, the destroyers left the convoy and returned to Scapa Flow. Convoy JW 54B arrived safely at Archangel in Russia later the same day.

HMS Hardy's third and final patrol was as part of the escort for the arctic convoys JW 56A and 56B.

JW 56A departed Loch Ewe on 12 January 1944, but had to shelter from storms at Akureyri in Iceland. On 21 January the convoy sailed and was joined by a group of nine fleet destroyers led by HMS Hardy. The convoy was attacked by German U-boats on 25 January. In the course of that day and the following night, one destroyer was damaged, three merchant ships were sunk and a fourth was damaged.

On 27 January, JW 56A was met by Soviet destroyers from Murmansk, and HMS Hardy and the remaining seven destroyers returned to reinforce convoy JW 56B, which it met on 29 January south of Bear Island. Waiting for the convoy were the ten U-boats that had attacked JW 56A plus five newcomers.

The attack began early on 30 January, when, at 04:00, HMS Hardy was hit by an acoustic torpedo which had homed in on the destroyer's propeller noise and caused severe damage aft. The crew were taken off by HMS Venus which then sank the Hardy, as in those circumstances it was not safe to take her in tow. Six of the U-boats made a total of thirteen attacks during that day but they were unable to reach the merchant ships

Mr George Anthony White was a young sailor on HMS Hardy and he recalled its end:²

The back of the Ship was torpedoed right off. I had finished my watch and was asleep. It was 4am. It was my friend Bean who was on watch, I saw him laid out, he didn't make it. The Germans knew when the watch changed and timed their attacks.

We were sinking. I saw part of the ship go under and the green of the sea, I thought that was it. A Lieutenant ordered us to go up to the focsule where it was safer.

AB McCarthy dived straight overboard off the sinking ship. His face appeared and I pulled him back on board. The water was freezing. He asked me what we should do. I said, "I am going to go down with the ship."

I had resigned myself to it. I never thought we would be rescued. We then looked for survivors and friends. You don't think about your own safety in that kind of situation. The commander came, we tried to get the lifeboats off but they were frozen stuck. We managed to get one off. I held its rope as the others went and picked the men out of the freezing water.

The commander got the DSO. The others got the British Empire Medal. I got nothing as I was holding the rope!

Another ship came alongside. HMS Venus. The Captain said over the tannoy, "If you can jump, jump but I am sorry I can't stop." We all managed to jump off as the boat was sinking.

HMS Hardy sank in the Barents Sea, 185 miles north of Norway. Of the 225 crew, 33 were missing presumed killed and two died of wounds.

² This was contributed by Leeds Libraries to WW2 People's War which is an online archive of wartime memories contributed by members of the public and gathered by the BBC. The archive can be found at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ww2peopleswar/>.

Being a stoker, Raymond would have been in the engine rooms during the fighting and was probably killed by the explosion of the torpedoes. He has no known grave other than the wreck of HMS Hardy but is remembered on Plymouth Naval Memorial, Panel 90, Column 1. He is also remembered on the rolls of honour at Wells Town Hall and Wells Cemetery.