

# Dick Durham



Maurice Griffiths won the George Medal during the war but refused to discuss it. Years after his death I now know why

**A**t the end of a long afternoon recalling his life for my tape-recorder, Maurice Griffiths, legendary editor of *YM*, would pour me a small glass of gin, and look out from the study of his newly built bungalow in West Mersea, Essex.

He was then 90 years old, an Edwardian gentleman of impeccable manners, fearless candour, and brimming with design wrinkles garnered from 60 years of yacht designing. And yet there was one subject about which he remained tight-lipped: the circumstances which led to his award of the George Medal. Try though I might to bring him back to the story he always brushed it off and I failed to priss the details from him.

Then, just recently, 20 years after I wrote his obituary for *The Times*, I stumbled across the very yarn I had been seeking, and I can now reveal the story.

The account was written by MG himself in his book *The Hidden Menace*, (Conway, 1981), about the tricky business of deactivating parachute mines dropped by German bombers over the Thames Estuary during the Second World War. But because he writes the account in the third person it is not immediately obvious he is referring to himself.

MG was then a lieutenant with the RNVR (Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve) and attached to Portsmouth's HMS *Vernon*, divers from which dealt with enemy mines dropped in British navigable channels. Later, bombs dropped on London during the Blitz included 'sea mines' and so HMS *Vernon's* officers also found themselves working ashore.

It was one such that MG had to deactivate: 'six feet of evil-looking cylinder hiding almost a ton of high explosive, half buried in the backyard of a small terrace house with its tail leaning against the kitchen window. Its parachute was draped like a shroud over the chimney pots on the roof,' MG recalled.

The whole street had been evacuated by police, 'and there seemed an uncanny silence

over the scene. He knew that the clock mechanism should have run off its 20 seconds or so on landing and detonated the mine, but for some reason it had failed to do so.'

Maurice pressed his ear to the side of the case and fumbled to fit his special non-magnetic spanner on the screws of the primer plate.

'So keyed up was he that, try as he would, he could not hold the spanner without shaking, and swore under his breath as the pins of the ring spanner rattled against the aluminium plate.

'From inside the case came a muffled ticking. The young lieutenant dropped the spanner and cleared the fence in a flying leap, was across the neighbouring garden in a trice, but found the other fence higher and too much for him to leap over. But it was in poor shape and as he charged it the rotten boards gave way under his weight. He rolled over and landed on his back in the next garden as the fence fell on him.'

That was the moment the mine went off. 'It seemed as though the whole earth erupted... as he screwed himself up into a ball under the woodwork, pieces of earth and bricks and debris continued to thud all around him, but happily he was not hit.'

Maurice crawled out from under the fence panels, his ears ringing, to find that 20 terraced houses had been demolished.'

'Although he was alive, and thankful to find himself apparently uninjured, the thought of all those families now homeless through his own failure to deal with the mine began to prey on him... he felt saddened and far from a hero.'

Maurice, himself, had been homeless for some of his youth after the bank foreclosed on his feckless father, taking the family house.

At last I knew the reason for his reticence. ▲

*'There was one subject on which he always remained tight-lipped'*

## Listen to the podcast

DICK RECORDS A  
PODCAST OF HIS COLUMN

Listen online or download via:

[www.yachtingmonthly.com/podcasts](http://www.yachtingmonthly.com/podcasts)

