



Information sheet no 084

Harold Auten VC

Harold Auten was born in Leatherhead on 22 August 1891, son of a retired naval paymaster. He attended grammar school in Camberwell and was apprenticed to the P&O line at the age of seventeen. In 1910, he joined the Royal Naval Reserve and was promoted to Sub-Lieutenant just prior to the outbreak of the war in 1914.

Auten mainly served on Q-ships. These were decoy ships, armed vessels but disguised as innocent merchant ships with the aim to fool U-boats into surfacing. Once the U-boat had surfaced, the guns were opened and the U-boat fired upon. Auten served on *Zylpha*, a former collier, from early in 1915. In April 1917, he took over the command of *Q.16*, also called *Heather* after her Commanding Officer had been killed in action against a U-boat. While he was serving in this ship, he won the Distinguished Service Cross.

Afterwards, he joined the former collier, *HMS Stock Force*, a vessel that he seen for himself in Cardiff docks. On 30 July 1918, the ship was twenty five miles south west of Start Point, Cornwall when the ship was torpedoed by a U-boat. The torpedo hit a forward bulkhead and the vessel sustained severe damage, including the bridge. Some of the crew, known as the "Panic Party" left in the boats, but Auten, the gun crews and the engine-room crew remained aboard. The U-boat surfaced half a mile from the damaged ship and the Panic Party rowed back in the boats to try and get the submarine to follow, which it did. At 5.40 p.m., the Q-ship opened fire. Three direct hits were made, one blowing off the periscope, one blowing up the conning tower and the third ripped into the submarine's hull. Firing continued until the U-boat sank beneath the surface. Four hours later, the little Q-ship also gave way to the damage sustained earlier in the day and sank, still flying the White Ensign, after the crew were taken off by torpedo boat. Auten's Victoria Cross entry in the London Gazette made no mention of the action, merely giving his name and rank. He was presented with his medal by King George V at Buckingham Palace on 18th September 1918.

After the war, he wrote about his naval wartime service in a book *Q boat adventures*, and in 1922, began work in the film industry. In August 1925, he was promoted to Lieutenant-Commander in the RNR. In 1929, the Prince of Wales gave a dinner for Victoria Cross holders in London's Guildhall and Auten replied to the Prince's speech on behalf of the naval VC's. He became Executive Vice-President of the Rank Organisation in New York and lived for thirty years in Bushkill, Pennsylvania, where he owned a hotel and cinema. In August 1939, he was promoted to Commander RNR and, during the Second World War, he was employed in routing convoys across the Atlantic from New York. He died on 3rd October 1964 in Pennsylvania.