

JACK



# The life and death of Jack Bishop, Royal Navy.

"As long as we embrace them in our memory, their spirit will always be with us."

For probably the last time, I take up my pen to write about my long lost great-uncle Jack. Its been nearly 20 years now since I began researching his short life; the details of which ran through my family's folklore like a half forgotten nursery rhyme.

Grandpa said Jack was torpedoed at sea and that my great-grandfather always used to leave the back door open, just in case he came back. The truth, that sadly my forebears never knew, was even more fascinating. A story of danger, secrets, lies, betrayal, courage, tragedy, espionage, questions in Parliament that led 16-year-old Jack, of Lax Lane, Bewdley, dying alongside a German secret agent on-the-run, who perished disguised as a Mexican.

Jack was a loss that resonated decades after the freezing waters of the Atlantic closed over his lifeless body. He was a vigorous young blood torn from the bosom of his family long before his time. A child sent to fight a men's war who paid the ultimate price.

I don't know whether many people will read it, that is not important. What is important, as we pass the 90th anniversary of the end of the First World War, is that Jack's sacrifice is not forgotten. He was one of nearly a million who paid with life or limb for our country, but he was special; he was ours. A young life snuffed out; a sturdy branch of my family hacked off before it blossomed.

Jack was just a teenager, too young to be at war, who was one of the first British servicemen to go into the field. He had lied about his age to join the Royal Navy, through a combination of ambition and the press of poverty, and was certainly highly unlucky to die in the way he did.

I came across many child soldiers during my years of reporting in Africa and as much as I found it appalling, I often thought ruefully that my great-uncle wasn't much older when he faced the terrors of the North Sea.

I often wonder what Jack would have made of his great-grand nephew researching his short life nearly a century after it ended. I'm sure he would have been surprised to know his picture looks down from the walls of my home in South Africa . I don't know what a stocky, young working class lad from Worcestershire would have made of any of it; he may have been proud, or just puzzled, or both . Certainly, he would have known that respect for our own blood is that which makes us Bishops. So, maybe, where ever his is, I hope he does know and smiles in agreement.

My research has been carried out intermittently over the last two decades. I looked into Royal Navy records when I was working in London and, in latter years, have carried out exhaustive research on the internet. It is a sign of the times that, with a few clicks of the mouse, I can find out more than my great-grand parents and Royal Navy ever knew about the untimely demise of my great-uncle Jack.

May he rest in peace.

I dedicate this research to my grand-grand father, John Charles Bishop, a great patriarch and rock upon which a family was built, who should never have blamed himself for Jack's death, to my grandfather, Eric Hunt, who carried Jack's story to my generation; and to my father, Tony, who taught me about family, decency and that knowledge is power. He also taught me never to be afraid of a short sentence. Indeed. Thanks Dad.

## CHAPTER ONE

### The grief of loss.

My great-grandfather was a tower of a man. More than six foot tall with hands like hams. They used to call him "The Big Un" - the big man. He was a brawler, a battler, undoubtedly a boozier and he

worked his strong body, as a farm labourer, rope maker and leather worker for most of his life, for a few shillings a week. A life of struggle, hard physical work in the good times and unemployment in the bad.

In the weeks following that cold day in January 1915, the big man could take no more. A chaplain and naval officer had knocked at the door at 44 Lax lane .They told my great-grandmother Rosa – that the apple of the family's eye, her favourite son, was dead. John Bishop, the 16-year-old, who had left hearth and home for the North Sea just weeks before, was not coming home. He was “lost at sea” after the disappearance of HMS Viknor on January 13, somewhere off the coast of Ireland. A few days later one of the 10 surviving ship mates of Jack's – who had escaped narrowly the sinking of the Viknor by being placed on a prize crew – arrived at Lax Lane. He had promised his shipmate he would in the event of death. With him, this sadly nameless shipmate, brought a chocolate tin with pictures of the royals on the box containing the few personal effects of Jack. A batch of cigarette cards survive in my possession to this day.

As the seaman told of Jack's last days, the big man broke down and wept like a baby.

“Why Jack ? Why Jack ?” said John Bishop over and over again as he wept before his family, probably for the first time in his life. The children stood with tears in their eyes and told the story to their own children decades later.

That was it for the big man. Although he always left the back door unlocked in the hope that Jack would arrive home, with a tale of being washed up on the shore somewhere – he knew in his heart of hearts that his beloved boy had gone, worse still, the big man knew he was partly to blame.

John Bishop, already a drinker, hit the bottle – as much as a bottle of whiskey a day according to family memories – and died of cancer of the stomach in 1927; a pained man. He was buried at Ribbesford Church and on his tomb was the name of his son – Jack. Like many families who lost people in the First World War, the Bishops did not have a body to bury.

At the end of the war a “Dead Man's Penny” - that is a bronze disc emblazoned with a Britannia with a lion at her heels – was delivered to Lax Lane, along with a scroll, in honour of Jack. The legend reads: “He died for freedom and honour.” When the penny came out there was controversy as some people felt the depiction of a British lion devouring a German eagle was too warlike for the peace era. I doubt very much that my family ever objected.

The family heard little else about Jack's demise, through official channels, they knew little about how he died and probably nothing of the controversy and drama that surrounded it.

In the 1920s a metal war memorial was built, on the side of St Anne's Church in the centre of Bewdley, bearing Jack's name among the fallen of town. When I was a small boy, my grandfather , Eric, and I walked from his house in Kidderminster to Bewdley to visit my roots. We stood hand-in-hand in front of the memorial, while my grandfather told me the tale of his long lost brother. He always sounded sad and a bit later he gave me Jack's writing case as a family memento. It sparked a life-long interest in Jack's short life and death. On summer nights, when I was a teenager, after an evening in a Bewdley pub, I would make a detour through the darkened streets of the town, so I could walk past the memorial. I used to touch the letters of Jack's name, out of respect and wonder – why ? .

In the following chapters I hope to explain. For this we have to go right back to the beginning.

## Chapter Two

### Jack the Lad.

Jack Bishop was born on a cold November night in 1898 at 44, Lax Lane. Jack was the second son of a union between two very large working class families living in Lax Lane - the Bishops and the Garbetts. Between them they had the numbers to form a political party. The Bishops alone had 13 children, of which only 11 survived. .

John Charles and Rosa Garbett married at Kidderminster Register Office on January 5 1884. She was 23, he was just 18 – a rare age gap in those days. There was no hint of a pregnancy and the first

child, Jane – whom I knew as a child in the 1970s as Auntie Jennie – was born more than three years after the marriage in 1887.

When Jack was born, his father had just started a new job at the Severnside Tannery, on the banks of the River Severn, just a few minutes walk from Lax Lane. For years John had been a rope maker at Lowe's Rope Factory on the other side of the river. The job as a leather finisher must have been seen as a step for a man who began life, like most of his peers, as a farm labourer. Apart from anything else it meant a shorter walk to work.

But like a lot of manual jobs in those days, the leather working business lacked glory. One of John Bishop's first jobs of the day was to drive a horse-and-cart through the streets of Bewdley to collect urine from the night before. People used to sell their urine and the tannery used in the leather making process.

Out on the streets of Bewdley, John Bishop was a tough and respected man among the 4,000 population of the town. The big man was as respected as he was huge and ready with his fists. When the traveling showmen came to Bewdley with their boxing rings and prizefighters – daring the brave among the population to go one round – John Bishop was usually the first through the ropes.

On Saturday nights, for a bit of fun, John and his younger brother and drinking partner, Charles, used to “take on the town” after the pubs had closed. That is, they used to stand back-to-back, with fists raised, to take on all comers. Often this bit of fun used to develop into a mass brawl and the lone policeman on duty in Bewdley at nights had to cycle to Kidderminster to summon reinforcement to quell the disorder.

There are many other stories about John Bishop. Apparently the family had an old piano at Lax Lane with a seat built into it, and John Bishop could tilt it to one side, with one arm, while one of his daughters continued playing. The big man was also a rescuer and when people got into trouble in the River Severn the call went out and John Bishop would dive in – with a rope wrapped around his middle – to save the day. There were also stories saying the big man was always chosen to carry the coffins of the rich and powerful through the town because he was so tall.

From the start, young Jack was the apple of his father's eye. He grew up to be a strong, handsome and bright boy.

Along with the rest of his family, Jack went to the National School, a few yards down Lax Lane. He probably left when he was around 14 years old and around that time was given a small wooden writing case, which I still have to this day. It has brass hinges and is lined with purple velvet. Inside the lid, in fading ink, is Jack's only surviving signature: “Jack Bishop 1910.”

Life after school was hard. Jack left for a job as an errand boy, delivering meat on a bicycle for a town butcher. In fact, all the Bishop boys delivered meat in their time. I remember my grandfather saying that if you fell off the bike and spilt the meat, you simply used to brush off the dirt and deliver.

This was Jack's lot as the Bishop family entered 1911- a year that was something of a watershed for Britain and my family. The British Empire was at its peak – the British had no doubt that God had chosen them to lead the world through the richest empire the world had ever seen..

Like most British homes at the time, there were few riches in the Bishop household. In 1911, nine members of the Bishop family were squeezed into seven rooms – living two and three to a bed. Money was tight, working hours were long and conditions harsh for the country's 17 million workers. Of those, no women and only 8 million men out of 25 million – those who owned a house – had the vote. That means no one on the Bishop family at the time could have a say in who ran their country. The country was short of an estimated 100,000 houses and those who did have a roof over their head, also had long drop toilets and not running water.

That year, John Bishop was working as a leather finisher at the tannery, Thomas Bishop, aged 17, was working as a creeler at a carpet factory, lifting piles of heavy yarn onto the looms. Sarah was a domestic servant at a boarding house, while Jack and his brothers and sisters, were still at school. The year 1911, was the year King George V was crowned and travelled to India to be hailed as Emperor; it was the year Ronald Reagan was born. For the poor, it was the year Britain created the

National Insurance Act to ensure the sick elderly and unemployed were looked after. There was a lot of opposition in Parliament among members who feared they were creating a nation of slackers. Most people in Bewdley could only watch from the sidelines – in 1911 only around 3 million of the country's 38 million population was entitled to vote. You had to own property first and that ruled out the Bishop family.

Cars were a rare sight and there were a mere 144,000 motor vehicles on the roads of Britain. Air mail came into being and on the ground there were 1.2 million Britons working down the coal mines – one-in-five of them, in the narrow seams of South Wales. Norwegian Roald Amundsen beat Briton Robert Scott to the North Pole.

It was the year when the Titanic was launched and the British government received a secret memo bearing details of Germany's plans for war.

In 1911, the Royal Navy launched five new battleships, including their biggest ever, the King George V.

This was also the year when Thomas Bishop decided to give up working in a carpet factory for adventure, a uniform and career. A decision that was to change the course of his life and that of his young brother, Jack.

### **Chapter Three.**

#### **Brothers before the mast – the Royal Navy.**

**On June 17 1912, Thomas Bishop, then aged 18, signed on with the Royal Navy – the senior service – for 12 years and became seaman M4650. His service record says he was 5'6" tall, with brown hair, blue eyes and a "fresh" complexion. Thomas was to spend his entire life in the Navy and rose to the rank of Sick Bay Chief Petty Officer in 1927 – the same year he won his long service medal.**



**Thomas Bishop RN.**

**When Thomas arrived home on leave, with money in his pocket and a uniform on his back, he must have cut a dashing figure in Lax Lane. Jack at once fell in love with the idea of joining the Navy and vowed to follow his brother. For him, it promised travel, adventure, a square meal-a-day and a future.**

**There was plenty of encouragement for strong young men, like Jack, as Britain struggle to crew its growing fleet of warships. Britain, under the eye of the navy-building seaman, Admiral John Fisher, was expanding its fleet, in the face of an imperial threat from Germany. The foundations for a new battle fleet – complete with the new Dreadnought ships equipped with steam turbines and the biggest guns on the sea– were laid in 1911 and a new generations of young sailors was needed to sail it.**

**Jack desperately wanted to be one of those young sailors. There was a big problem, he was simply too young. The Royal Navy took boy seamen for**



training at fifteen and three quarters. It meant Jack had another year of riding an errand boy's bike around Bewdley and he just couldn't wait.

So, it meant the Bishop and Garbett families had to concoct one of those little family conspiracies that everyone turns a blind eye to if they succeed.

The plan was for Jack to lie about his age to the local Registrar, Thomas Pennington, at Bewdley Town Hall in the High Street. This was done with the help of his uncle Richard Garbett, another carpet worker, who countersigned a duplicate birth certificate – doctored to say Jack had been born a year earlier than he had – under the Factory and Workshop Act 190. This certificate was all employers needed to verify the age of a worker and it was Jack's passport into the Royal Navy cost sixpence.

Jack and Rosa Bishop, either went along with the deception, or were faced with a fait accompli. My great-grandfather signed the consent papers and retained the right to take Jack out of the Navy for being under age – but he never did.

It meant Jack signed on the dotted line on September 4 1913, less than a year before World War One broke out. Overnight, he became John Bishop, Boy Second Class, service number: J28161. Soon afterwards, his family waved him off through the steam and smoke of Bewdley Station and off down the Severn Valley line to Portsmouth and a new life.

## **Chapter Four.**

**Flogging, knots and coal shovels – training in Portsmouth.**

The reality of Jack's arrival at Portsmouth was far from romantic. He stepped off the train and Plymouth ready for his first day before the mast on October 18 1913.

Plymouth was the headquarters of the Western Fleet, one of the largest naval bases in the world had ever seen and a sinew of imperial power. It was nicknamed “Guz” by seamen because it was a supply station for His Majesty's Ships.

In Plymouth, Jack took in his first glimpse of battleships that, in the days before television, must have made him catch his breath. Brand new Dreadnought, the giants of the battle fleet, clustered into Devonport Dockyard, some lashed into threes and fours; an expanse of rigging and grey steel.

Everywhere teemed groups of shipwrights, fitters and rigging gangs as they made ready the biggest navy the world had ever seen.

Far from the hustle and bustle of the fleet, lay Jack's first ship HMS Impregnable – a rotting and barnacled hulk creaking at anchor in the Devonport Stream.

HMS Impregnable was a 121-gun wooden warship, launched in 1860, which was once the pride of the Victorian navy. It has started life as HMS Howe, was renamed HMS Bulwark in 1886 and finally HMS Impregnable in 1896 and turned into a training ship. Aboard more than a 1000 boy seamen were trained at a time.

Jack spent four days aboard HMS Impregnable, drilling, treading the deck for the first time, being fitted with a uniform and learning how to salute. He would

have been bathed, issued with a combined prayer and hymn book, and what was known as a “ditty box” in which he could lock away his letters and possessions. From there he would have been vaccinated and placed with the other new recruits.

A picture of the young Jack is painted by his service record. He stood five foot three inches tall, with brown hair and eyes. The Navy records say he was 33 and half inches across the chest and had a “fresh” complexion. There is no doubt his accent would have been as Worcestershire as the sauce.

The passing of the medical examination, the days when many young Englishmen were far from healthy, was crucial. The Royal Navy, it was once written, rejected nine out of ten boy recruits. They also had to prove themselves in reading, writing and arithmetic. The Navy took on more than 4,000 boy recruits every year.

Jack was then assigned to the training ship, HMS Powerful, where he would be moulded into an able seaman. Boys were trained for eight months before being assigned to a ship on their 17th birthday. In Jack's case – because of the forged papers – it would be his 16<sup>th</sup> birthday.

Aboard HMS Powerful, Jack was thrown together with a new breed of boy sailors from all over the country and all walks of life. They were known as “novices” and were put under the charge of an often kindly petty officer, who acted like a father-figure. These boys were the product of an improving education system and considered to be the more capable sons of the working class. They were needed to man the Navy's rapidly growing fleet. (The Windsor Magazine 1896)

They called these trainees “blue jackets” and they were blooded in a course of sea training, which began with learning how to swim. All were thrown into a wooden bath tub to complete the statutory swimming strokes. The bath measured three foot six inches at the shallow end and seven foot at the deep end. To pass you had to swim at least 40 yards with a “duck suit” or light clothing on. A young seaman also had to learn to ply and oar with ease.

Every young seaman had to learn to use a needle and pack their clothes. They also had to spend two hours a day learning in the classroom.

Life for Jack now began at 6 AM sharp. A cold bath followed by kippers for breakfast. Then, it was prayers and on to training classes. Boy ratings were taught how to rig, tie knots, climb masts, lay guns and shovel coal. The sweaty hours in the stoke hold were as important to the Navy as a good reef knot. Every rating had to spend at least six months shoveling mountains of coal into raging furnaces to keep the fleet moving. The youngsters also learned how to use a compass, semaphore and Morse Code.

Discipline was tough. The raw recruits learned under the beady eye of adult training officers. Often, they would strut through the ranks brandishing a rope that was used for the punishment of boys who stepped out of line.

The Brig had been abolished for boy seaman, but public corporal punishment wasn't. For a petty crime like stealing a packet of cigarettes, a boy could be flogged in the gymnasium before all hands. He would be strapped across a



vaulting horse, his wrists and ankles bound by canvas, while a fellow rating was forced to call out the strokes. It was usually a dozen with the cane.

The lower decks were no place for the meek. Jack must have fought for his place in the pecking order. Bullying was rife and often the training officers turned a blind eye. Boy seamen who had been promoted to petty officers were often the worst and ran bully boy networks.

At the end of the day there was a 5 PM kit inspection followed by a 6 PM dismiss. In the evenings, there were compensations for the rigors of life below decks. There were games and magic lantern shows.

Jack survived and flourished as a sixpence-a-week boy seaman. Like his brother, he had signed on for 12 years. This service would only begin on Jack's bogus 18<sup>th</sup> birthday on November 28 1916 – a date he would never see.

On June 7, 1914, Jack was promoted to Boy First Class, which meant he was considered officer material. Two-and-a-half weeks later he finished his training and signed on to his first ship, HMS Edgar in Portsmouth. Built in 1890 at Devonport the Edgar was a first class cruiser. It was the lead ship in the Edgar Class cruisers, one of the oldest warships in the fleet and often used to give boy seamen the chance to find their sea legs. The Edgar was armed with two nine-inch and 10 six-inch guns and was to see service at Gallipoli until it was damaged by an Austro-Hungarian U-Boat in April 1918. It was scrapped at Morecambe, Lancashire, in 1923.

One of Jack's first actions aboard HMS Edgar was to take part in the Spithead Review of July 1914 – the biggest ever gathering of British sea power. A show of strength just two weeks before war was declared on Germany. A triumph for the Royal Navy with a flotilla that took hours to pass the watching King. The Edgar is there tucked in behind its flagship, Crescent and fellow Edgar class cruisers Royal Arthur and Endymion.

What a story for the young Jack to tell as he returned home for two weeks in Bewdley at the end of the glorious summer of 1914. day to the tears and pride of his family. On his back he had a uniform that commanded respect, in his pocket he had money, on his shoulder was his kit bag packed with memories of an amazing year.

We can only imagine the allure of the uniform and success; the sweet scent of the hedgerows and mown meadows.

A telegram cut this blissful summer sojourn short. A call from the Royal Navy for all ratings to return to their ships as war was imminent. Jack headed off from Bewdley station as one of the first serving men to be mobilized in World War One. He was 15 years old

Everyone was patriotic, after all it would all be over by Christmas. The Bishop family would see Jack just one more time in his short life.

## **Chapter Five**

### **To War !**

Jack arrived back at the docks in Portsmouth where workers worked at a frantic pace to prepare warships for sea and the talk was on of one thing and one thing only – war. A war that was to kill millions all over the world and wreck the world where Jack grew up. Nothing would ever be the same again.

That night, Jack sat down and wrote on a piece of paper: “A Diary of the Great War.” It was still an adventure then and at the very least it meant his brief thoughts would be passed down through the generations, which was probably what he had in mind anyway.

The first entry in the diary records how Jack spent August 1 with a coal shovel in hand, loading precious fuel as HMS Edgar prepared for its first patrol. The Edgar carried 1,000 tons of coal and could burn up to 11 tons an hour at top speed. The next day work carried on from dawn until dusk as the deck was cleared for action..

On August 3, the day before war broke out, HMS Edgar set sail from Portsmouth, along the South Coast towards Cornwall and Lands End. The 570-strong crew lined the the warship's bows and saluted as the ship steamed out of Portsmouth alongside sister ships of the Edgar Class, Grafton and the flagship of the squadron Crescent; the Crescent was under the charge of Rear-Admiral Dudley de Chair. On the captain's bridge, aboard the Edgar, were sealed orders.

At midnight, Britain declared war on Germany. Security was stepped up throughout the armed forces for fear of attack. This state of alert found the Edgar wanting. Jack records in his diary that all hands were “told off” for not keeping watch.

The next stage of Jack's journey is taken up by a young man who was merely a year older than him who came from another world. Detailed accounts of the movements of Jack's ship, the Edgar, came from Alexander Scrimgeour, a 17-year-old midshipman aboard the flagship the Crescent. Scrimgeour, the son of a stockbroker, grew up in a wealthy family near Canterbury in Kent. He too kept a diary of his time patrolling the North Sea and helped to fill in many of the gaps in Jack's account with his wartime diary.

Jack Bishop and Alexander Scrimgeour may have come from opposite ends of the social scale, but both served their country bravely and paid with their young lives.

Scrimgeour records that the flagship Crescent met up with Jack and the Edgar at 8 AM on Tuesday August 4, just a couple of hours after steering past Lands Ends. Grafton joined them at 11 AM. During the night the three ships passed the Isle of Man as they steamed north towards Scotland.

Aboard the Edgar, Jack and his shipmates were getting used to handling the elderly vessel. The Edgar weighed 7350 tons, it was 360 feet long and slow. Maximum speed was only 19 knots making the warship very easy to intercept. The cruiser was one of a class of middle-aged vessels built under the Naval Defence Act of 1889 and they were all patched-up and poorly armoured. It's weak mix of 9.2 and 6 inch guns were to prove the downfall of many a crew during the war.

To make matters worse, its voracious appetite for coal left a massive smoke trail from its twin funnels for enemy ships miles around to see.

Despite it weaknesses, the Edgar struck one of the first naval blows of the war. On August 5, while steaming across the Irish Sea on the way north, it captured a German timber boat in rough weather off the island of Jura and the Grafton escorted it in to Belfast. Scrimgeour records ruefully that a cruiser squadron that should have numbered eight vessels, was now left with two.

A day later Jack arrived at Scapa Flow in the Orkney Islands. Here lay the largest battle fleet that the world had ever seen. There were row on row of warships amid a hive of activity. Here, the Edgar coaled before heading back out to patrol the grey waters of the North Sea. Summer was almost over and it was

going to get a lot rougher and colder in the coming months. Before he left, Jack was able to send home his first letters to Bewdley.

The Edgar was a kingpin in the newly appointed Admiral of the Fleet, Admiral Jellicoe's plan to win the war at sea. The idea was to cut supply from the sea to Germany and starve the country to its knees. Edgar may have been a creaking old relic, but it was at the heart of the 10<sup>th</sup> Cruiser Squadron that was to throw a blockade across the North Sea from Scotland to Scandinavia. Admiral Jellicoe expected heavy traffic to Germany along these northern shipping lanes with merchantmen running for home with food, volunteers, lead, coal and gun cotton. Eight cruisers stood in their way.

Edgar joined Crescent, Royal Arthur, Endymion, Gibraltar, Grafton, Hawke and Thesus to form Cruiser Force B, later renamed the 10<sup>th</sup> Cruiser Squadron. Between them they partolled Scottish, Shetland and Norwegian waters in search of contrabanders attempting to slip through. It was to prove a dangerous and frustrating task.

The Edgar held up and searched ships off the Fair Islands on August 7. The next day, the cruiser sank two German fishing trawlers for failing to stop. This entry in Jack's diary pays testament to his terse writing, he managed to squeeze the sinking of two vessels and a change of course to Norway into just nine words. The Edgar hit a gale as it steamed up the Norwegian coast to guard the trade routes. On August 12 the ship sailed for the Shetlands to send mail and collect 500 tons of coal.

The next day the Edgar swept the North Seas with the 1<sup>st</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> battle squadrons, sailing within 100 miles of the German coast. Jellicoe had drafted in the big guns to try to plug the gaps in the blockade. The Edgar was soon heading back to Lerwick in the Orkney Islands to take on 300 tons of coal before setting out for the Norwegian coast. On the way the crew was mustered in their "duck" suits as part of a battle drill. The same day, sister ship the Hawke captured a German collier.

On August 20, Jack went on his first boarding party. They charged aboard a Norwegian ship, the SS Bergensfjord, and found papers in order, but captured two German reservists who were lurking below decks. During the day an armed merchant cruiser, a converted liner from the Allan Line, came alongside the Edgar. It was a fast modern ship, renamed HMS Alsatian, one of a number of new armed merchant cruisers that joined the line on August 18 in a bid to strengthen the blockade.

Among the new vessels were a P and O cruiser and a White Star Atlantic liner, Oceanic.

But the job wasn't getting easier. The northern patrol was stopping many ships, but few were German and fewer were blockade breakers. The weather was getting worse by the day.

Royal Navy seamen were boarding more than 100 merchant ships a month – for nothing.

They searched in vain for double bottoms, dummy deckheads, false bulkheads and hollow steel masts full to the brim with contraband. To make a difficult job

even more so, was the fact that the Royal Navy had strict instructions to tread carefully in dealing with civilian merchant ships so as not to offend potential neutral allies like America – a country where a story was brewing that would intertwine itself with the fate of Jack Bishop, RN.

## **Chapter Six**

### **Spies, Lies and Low Life**

In New York in neutral America war fever was in the air, despite the fact that the United States had no intention of joining in. Expatriates from both side in the conflict were rallying, albeit from a distance, to their country's cause. There was a big German community in New York and the German Secret Service was trying hard to band them together to go back home and fight.

The job was taken by an attache to the German Embassy, Captain Franz von Papen, a man who was to survive both world wars and the Nuremburg trials before dying at home in bed in 1969. . A contemporary report of the day said: “The German Secret Service in America gathered together r German reservists who had been peaceful farmers, shopkeepers or waiters, all over the United States, were mobilized for service, and paraded through Battery Park in New York shouting "Deutschland, Deutschland uber alles !" to the strains of the Austrian hymn, while they waited for Papen's orders from a building near by, and picked quarrels with a counter procession of Frenchmen screaming the immortal "Marseillaise." Up in his office sat the attache, summoning, assigning, despatching his men on missions that were designed to terrorize America as the spiked helmets were terrorizing Belgium at that moment.”

**In the turmoil the German Embassy came up with a plan to speed reservists wanting to fight back to the fatherland. It knew that it was going to be tough to slip past Jack and the might of the Royal Navy with German passports. This is a passage from** The German Secret Service in America 1914-18: “Throughout August, 1914, it was comparatively easy for Germans in America who wished to respond to the call of the Fatherland to leave American shores. A number of circumstances tended swiftly to make it more hazardous. The British were in no mind to permit an influx of reservists to Germany while they could blockade Germany. The cordon tightened, and soon every merchant ship was stopped at sea by a British patrol and searched for German suspects. German spies here took refuge in the protection afforded by an American passport. False pass- ports were issued by the State Department in considerable quantities during the early weeks of war issued unwittingly, of course, for the false Passports applicant in most cases underwent no more than the customary peacetime examination.

Each additional precaution taken by the Government placed a new obstacle in the way of unlimited supply of passports. The Goltz method was easy enough, but it soon became impossible to employ it. The necessity for sending news, The German Secret Service in America through to Berlin by courier was increasingly urgent and it devolved upon Captain von Papen to systematize the supply of passports. The military attache in November selected Lieutenant Hans Adam von Wedell, who had already made a trip as courier to Berlin for his friend, Count von Bernstorff. Von Wedell was married to a German baroness. He had been a newspaper reporter in New York, and later a lawyer. He opened an office in Bridge Street, New York, and began to send out emissaries to sailors on interned German liners, and to their friends in Hoboken, directing them to apply for passports. He sent others to the haunts of tramps on the lower East Side, to the Mills Hotel, and other gathering places of the down-and-outs, offering ten, fifteen or twenty dollars to men who would apply for and deliver passports. And he bought them!

Von Wedell was to spend many months living it up in New York and gathering false passports. Little did he know he was to share the same fate as a 16-year-old Worcestershire boy who was risking his life on the rough, freezing seas on the other side of the world.

## Chapter 7

### Death and frustration on the high seas.

In the North Sea, the blockade was threatening to be a failure. Of 25 ships stopped and searched by the 10<sup>th</sup> Cruiser Squadron that autumn, only one was detained. Other guilty ships were slipping smugly through legal loopholes to the Baltic and Holland loaded up with copper, grain, sulphur and coal for the German war effort.

Morale was suffering among the young men of the Royal Navy. It is no surprise that the highlight of August 24 for Jack was that he had been ordered to paint the ship light grey, work which was cut short by an evening gale. Painting the ship was just one of the lowly tasks handed out to boy seamen. Life for them on board was hard. Jack would have been forced to call senior ratings and able seamen : "sir." **Like all the other boy seamen, he was at everyone's beck and call.**

**Bullying carried on at sea. In the gun rooms of the fleet the elder sailors often victimized boy seamen. One particularly sadistic game, handed down through the years, was called: "Fork in the beam." It went like this; when a fork was stuck into the wall of the gun room it was the signal for all boy seamen to scatters. The last one out got a dozen lashes with the scabbard of a dirk, or short knife.**

Not a hint of this darker side of naval life made it through to Jack's terse diary. Maybe, in those days, people only wanted to hear the glory story.

Jack had time to rest and send mail home after reaching Scapa Flow. In his diary, he noted several "prize" ships were in dock as the Edgar coaled and awaited orders. These "prize" ships were merchant vessels captured red handed by the Royal Navy. The value of these ships was paid over by the government and split up between the crew. In short, a "prize" meant a nice pay day from the captain right down to the lowest boy seaman.

The Edgar steamed out of Scapa Flow on August 29 to patrol German waters. During the patrol, it heard news of the naval battle off Heligoland.

Several ships were held up by the Edgar, including Swedish and Norwegian cargo boats. Jack records he boarded a British ship of the Wilson Line and met some Russian reservists sailing home to join the colours. It was a cordial get together, after all the war was probably still seen as a bit of a short-lived game.

The Edgar then joined up with part of the main battle fleet, cruising alongside the Good Hope and Drake. Together they swept the North Sea and with them Jack celebrated one year since joining the Royal Navy on September 1913.

The weather took a turn for the worse. On September 12 the sea was so rough that Jack and his shipmates had to struggle for a day to get mail from a sister ship, Dryad.

The day after one of the roughest nights the Edgar had seen it was ordered back to England. On September 20, the Edgar set sail for Newcastle, via Cromarty, and it arrived on the River Tyne the next day. The aging cruiser went into dry dock and Jack and his shipmates began the of scraping off the barnacles and cleaning away the seaweed from the hull.

That night, the young matelots of the Edgar went out into Newcastle for a night on the town. That evening Jack recorded the only hint that that he ever let his hair down and enjoyed himself.

"A good concert in the evening," he said.

The euphoria of the concert was short lived. Ship's company was up at dawn next morning and forced out cursing onto a route march. They returned to the draining job of coaling the Edgar.

Jack was back at sea the next day and ran straight into the teeth of a storm. The Edgar held up a Danish ship in very rough weather and sent to port for scrutiny. From now on these stormy conditions would be Jack's daily grind. Driving rain and freezing fog would gnaw into the bones of the young seaman on deck as they struggled to board lurching merchant ships. Many young men, including Jack, would cling for dear life to ropes and rails, with hot cocoa one of the few compensations.

On October 7, came boost for the men of the Edgar in the shape of a signal from the War Office. The signal said 180,000 German troops had been killed, wounded or captured in France. Maybe it could be over by Christmas ? Maybe suffering in the cold of the North Sea was worth it after all. The Edgar docked at Cromarty and Jack spent the day working on the ships's main derrick and exercising with searchlights.

The Edgar steamed south to patrol. There were plenty of neutral merchant ships to be stopped and searched. On October 13, the Edgar met up with its sister ship, Hawke. The day after the weather was fine, they were collaring plenty of contraband runners. The day after, Jack celebrated the boarding of a Norwegian vessel by opening up a food parcel from the Navy League. The pears and apples inside could have been a welcome reminder of his far away Worcestershire home.

The horrors of war stalked the Edgar and the northern patrol. At three bells on October 15 the crew was scrambling for battle stations following a frantic wireless signal from another warship. A U-Boat had fired torpedoes at sister ship, Thesus. Gun crews were on stand by and were further chilled by the news that the Hawke was missing. Scrimgeour records in his diary that the attack on the Thesus, was unsuccessful and seaplanes saw the U-Boat fleeing towards Cromarty. He also recorded, chillingly, that his ship, Crescent, sighted wreckage in the water, which they thought could be the remains of the missing Hawke.

At 10 AM on October 17, Jack and his shipmates received the bitter news. The Hawke was gone, torpedoed off Aberdeen by the U9. Many of Jack's training pals were drowned, a mere 49 survived. The lucky few were on a cutter lowered by the Hawke just before the torpedoes struck. They survived, but were forced to watch their comrades perish in the freezing waters.

Scrimgeour wrote bleakly in his diary of the sinking of the Hawke: "It is interesting to note that 2 hours before she went to sea on her last trip, Captain Williams came to board to ask for 2 days extra to repair his engines. This was refused as he could still do 10 knots. In order to obviate the danger of submarine attacks it is customary for all our warships to leave and enter Moray Firth at full speed minimum 17 knots. The Hawke could not possibly, at forcing power, do more than just over half this speed. Captain Williams realized the extreme danger of this, hence his personal appeal to the Admiral. His last words to the flag lieutenant were : "It is pure murder sending the ship with over 500 officers and men on board to sea in this state. His words proved correct in a disastrously short space of time. The story of the Hawke being stopped for boarding a ship, when hit by the submarine, was invented by the Admiralty to prevent unpleasant questions and a public outcry. She was attacked going out of the Moray Firth at maximum speed viz: 10 knots, and an extra 5 knots would have probably saved her. Those five knots could have been attained by an extra 2 days in harbour."

Who was next ? The danger and fear put the crew of the Edgar on full, but the anxious wave watching soon dissolved into boredom. It was back to cleaning and coaling as the ship lurched into the port of Buscavow.

## **Chapter 8**

### **The Spies run out of luck and in to trouble.**

In New York Baron Hans Adam von Wedell was still running around the docks buying fake passports

**from down and outs to give to German soldiers to speed them home to the war.**

**Von Wedell and his fellow spy, Carl Ruroede, were becoming careless and reckless as they basked in their early successes in gathering fake passports. They were soon to become among the few spies in the world to be blackmailed by the very people that they were supposed to be using.**

**The book *The German Secret Service in America 1914-18* takes up the story:** "Von Wedell and Ruroede grew reckless and boastful. Two hangers-on at the Mills Hotel called upon one of the writers of this volume one day and told him of von Wedell's practices, related how they had blackmailed him out of \$50, gave his private telephone numbers and set forth his haunts. When this and other information reached the Department of Justice, Albert G. Adams, a clever agent, insinuated himself into Ruroede's confidence, and offered to secure passports for him for \$50 each. Posing as a pro-German, he pried into the inner ring of the passport-buyers, and was informed by Ruroede just how the stock of passports needed replenishing. Though in the early days of the war it had not been necessary for the applicant to give more than a general description of himself, the cry of "German spies!" in the Allied countries became so insistent that the Government added the requirement of a photograph of the bearer. The Germans, however, found it a simple matter to False Passports 87 give a general description of a man's eyes, color of hair, and age to fit the person who was actually to use the document; then forwarded the picture of the applicant to be affixed. The applicant receiving the passport, would sell it at once. Even though the official seal was stamped on the photograph the Germans were not dismayed. Adams rushed into Ruroede's office one day waving a sheaf of five passports issued to him by the Government. Adams was ostensibly proud of his work, Ruroede openly delighted. "I knew I could get these passports easily," he boasted to Adams. "Why, if Lieutenant von Wedell had kept on here he never could have done this."

For the hapless von Wedell the heat was too much and he fled to Cuba and wrote a grovelling letter to his superiors that went like this and was dated in Nyack, where he was hiding in New York, on December : " "His Excellency The Imperial German Ambassador, Count von Bernstorff, Washington, D. C. Your Excellency : Allow me most obediently to put before you the following facts : It seems that an attempt has been made to produce the impression upon you that I prematurely abandoned my post, in New York. That is not true. "I My work was done. At my departure I left the service, well organized and worked out to its minutest details, in the hands of my successor, Mr. Carl Ruroede, picked out by myself, and, despite many warnings, still tarried for several days in New York in order to give him the necessary final directions and in order to hold in check the blackmailers thrown on my hands by the German officers until after the passage of my travellers through Gibraltar; in which I succeeded. Mr. Ruroede will testify to you that without my suitable preliminary labours, in which I left no conceivable means untried and in which I took not the slightest consideration of my personal weal or woe, it would be impossible for him, as well as for Mr. von Papen, to forward officers and /aspirants' in any number whatever, to Europe. This merit I lay claim to and the occurrences of the last days have unfortunately compelled me, out of sheer self-respect, to emphasize this to your Excellency. The motives which induced me to leave New False Passports NewYork and which, to my astonishment, were not communicated to you, are the following: "1. I knew that the State Department had, for three weeks, withheld a passport application forged by me. Why? "2. Ten days before my departure I learnt from a telegram sent me by Mr. von Papen, which stirred me up very much, and further through the omission of a cable, that Dr. Stark had fallen into the hands of the English. That gentleman's forged papers were liable to come back any day and could, owing chiefly to his lack of caution, easily be traced back to me. "3. Officers and aspirants of the class which I had to forward over, namely the people, saddled me with a lot of criminals and blackmailers, whose eventual revelations were liable to bring about any day the explosion of the bomb. "4. Mr. von Papen had repeatedly urgently ordered me to hide myself. " 5. Mr. Igel had told me I was taking the matter altogether too lightly and ought to for God's sake disappear. "6. My counsel . . . had advised me to hastily quit New York, inasmuch as a local detective



agency was ordered to go after the passport forgeries. "7. It had become clear to me that eventual arrest might yet injure the worthy undertaking and that my disappearance would probably put a stop to all investigation in this direction. "How urgent it was for me to go away is shown by the fact that, two days after my departure, detectives, who had followed up my telephone calls, hunted up my wife's harmless and unsuspecting cousin in Brooklyn, and subjected her to an interrogatory. "Mr. von Papen and Mr. Albert have told my wife that I forced myself forward to do this work. That is not true. When I, in Berlin, for the first time heard of this commission, I objected to going and represented to the gentleman that my entire livelihood which I had created for myself in America by six years of labour was at stake therein. I have no other means, and although Mr. Albert told my wife my practice was not worth talking about, it sufficed, nevertheless, to decently support myself and wife and to build my future on. I have finally, at the persuasion of Count Wedell, undertaken it, ready to sacrifice my future and that of my wife. I have, in order to reach my goal, despite infinite difficulties, destroyed everything that I built up here for myself and my wife. I have perhaps sometimes been awkward, but always full of good will, and I now travel back to Germany with the consciousness of having done my duty as well as I understood it, and of having accomplished my task. "With expressions of the most exquisite consideration, I am, your Excellency, "Very respectfully, "( Signed) HANS ADAM VON WEDELL

Von Wedell was on his way out of the United States. It was a move that would intertwine his fate with a broad shouldered working class lad called Jack Bishop, of 44 Lax Lane, Bewdley, Worcestershire.

## Chapter 9

### Suffering at sea.

The wind howled as the Edgar left port for the last time with Jack on board. Life on board was still routine, but the elements conspired to destroy. The Edgar was thrashed around by gale force winds, mountainous waves and lashing rain.

**Amid the squall of storms, Jack and his shipmates had to attempt the boarding of suspect ships as they bobbed in filthy weather amid extreme danger. On November 4, they chased a Norwegian boat for six hours through choppy seas. Sister ship Endymion helped make the capture and a prize crew took over the helm.**

**Three days and several boardings later, the Edgar made its first catch. A Norwegian steamer was trapped as it tried to slip through the blockade. It became the Edgar's first prize ship and it meant a bonus for all back at port. A fillip for all hands.**

**Harsh reality was just around the corner. November 11 1914 was a terrible day for those on the North Sea. The gales, which had been blowing for more than two days and nights, worsened into a violent storm – Admiral Dudley de Chair called it the worst gale he had ever seen and feared the flagship, Crescent, may not survive it.**

**Scrimgeour takes up the story by saying the chaos began at midnight when the Crescent sounded the alarm thinking there were German mine layers in the area. Everyone was at their guns within two minutes, but it was later found that the weather was so bad that the Germans had turned back to port.**

**The foul weather took centre stage for the rest of a terrifying day. The storm was blowing gale of more than force 10, making waves of up to 45 feet high along with driving rain and hailstorms. There were fears that the Edgar and many other ships would capsize as water swamped their bows. Jack was left clinging to the deck for dear life against the power of the storm. He watched a shipmate wash overboard. A sea boat splintered before his eyes while cranes and booms crashed around him; ammunition rolled dangerously around the slippery decks. Both the Edgar and the Thesus were to lose several hands in the storm.**

**The Edgar limped in to Buscavow as the storm gave way to snow. Refueling began in freezing**

temperatures and was made more difficult by the fact that the coaling boat had been holed in the the storm. It took all day to load 560 tons.

Work and stress in these bitter conditions had taken their toll on young Jack. The next day he went sick. His last diary entry on November 14 1914 said: “Still snowing, sick list.” He had less than eight weeks to live.

The Edgar was suffering too. It had started to break down under the pressure of hard steaming through stormy waters. It was to be taken temporarily out of service to be patched up..Jack saluted the flag of the Edgar for the last time on December 4.He spent a short time at HMS Victory shore base in Portsmouth and headed home to Worcestershire for a few days leave. What a story he had to tell by the fireside, but in his last few weeks of life he must have been very shaken by what he had seen so far on the high seas.

## **Chapter 10**

### **Heading for disaster disguised as a Mexican.**

Back in New York, Baron Hans Adam von Wedell and his fellow spies were getting out. The streets of the city had become too hot for them and the American secret service was on their tail.

All decided it was time to run. They booked their passages on a ship, unfortunately they berthed onto the SS Bergensffjord, a ship already boarded and well known by the Royal Navy. To make matters worse, Adams, the US Federal agent who had infiltrated the German passport racket, had arranged for the authorities to swoop on the escapees as they left New York harbour.

**The German Secret Service in America 1914-18 takes up the story:** “Through Adams' efforts Ruroede and four Germans, one of them an officer in the German reserves, were arrested on January 2, on the Scandinavian-American liner Bergensffjord outward bound to Bergen, Norway. They had pass- ports issued through Adams at Ruroede's request under the American names of Howard Paul Wright, Herbert S. Wilson, Peter Hanson and Stanley F. Martin. Their real names were Arthur Sachse, who worked in Pelham Heights, N. Y., and who was returning to become a lieutenant in the German Army; Walter Miller, August R. Meyer and Herman Wegener, who had come to New York from Chile, on their way to the Fatherland. On the day when Ruroede, his assistant, and the four men for whom he obtained passports were arrested, Joseph A. Baker, assistant superintendent of the Federal agents in New York, took possession of the office at Bridge Street. As he was sorting papers and making a general investigation, a German walked in bearing a card of introduction from von Papen, introducing him- self as Wolfram von Knorr, a German officer who up to the outbreak of the war had been naval attache in Tokyo. The officer desired a passport. Baker, after a conversation in which von Knorr revealed von Papen's connection with the passport bureau, told him to return the next day. When the German read the next morning's news- papers he changed his lodging-place and his name. Von Wedell himself was a passenger on the Bergensffjord, but when he was lined up with the other passengers, the Federal agents, who did not have a description of him, missed him and left the vessel.”

So Von Wedell – disguised as a Mexican with a passport to match – carried on aboard the SS Bergensffjord across the Atlantic Ocean toward Norway and an unwelcome meeting with Jack and his shipmates.Rureode and the others were sentenced to three years in prison in Atlanta, Georgia..

## **Chapter 11**

### **Jack's last ship**

**HMS VIKNOR.**

**Jack reported aboard HMS Viknor on December 12 1914 .His new**

**vessel ,like the Edgar,was another makeshift warship .The 5,300-ton**

**Viknor was the flag ship of Viking Cruising Company,refitted and**

**armed as a naval service. It was renamed Viknor to avoid confusion**



with the Naval destroyer HMS Viking. The Viknors 's crew was makeshift too. Some of the ship's company were ratings from the scrapped Edgar class ships ,but most were Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve men and drafted reservists .We can only guess how happy Jack and his sea hardened shipmates were serving alongside part-time sailors. Many of the new crew were Newfoundlanders with strange sounding accents .In charge of this motley crew was thirty nine year old commander Ernest Orford Ballantyne , a veteran skipper with twenty four years sea faring behind him. Second -in-command was Lieutenant Commander Hardinge Shephard, 32,who served under Sir John Jellicoe in the chinese boxer rebellion of 1899-1900.The Viknor sailed straight for the North Sea .The crew soon found they had swapped one trundler for another .The Viknor was the same age as the Edgar and could only make a mere 17 knots,if pushed.



*Illustration 1: HMS Viknor*

Nevertheless .Admiral Jellicoe wanted it to strengthen the blockade by the northern patrol .It was one a number armed merchant cruisers ,as they became known,to be pressed into service . Others included the five 6,000 -ton banana boats ,Bayano ,Changuinola,Montague,Patia and Patnea.Under. Under Admiral De Chair's command the armed merchant cruisers formed an arc from Kristiansand across to the Faroe Islands.By Boxing day 1915 ,12 armed merchant cruisers held the blockade barrier .The scene was set for the last dramatic episode in my great uncles short life.

## **Chapter 11**

### **Victory, explosion and mystery.**

**The fatal turn of events began on Friday December 8 when the commander in chief began flashing messages to the fleet that the SS Bergensffjord should be captured at all costs. At 4PM on Sunday December 10 the flagship of the 10<sup>th</sup> Cruiser Squadron, the Crescent, picked up faint wireless signals from the Bergensffjord talking to its head office in Bergen and saying it was going to make a run for home.**

**The Royal Navy had been hunting the Bergensffjord for some time. British intelligence suspected, quite rightly, that German reservists had joined her in New York and were believed to be armed with fake passports provided by the German Embassy.**

**The Bergensffjord was deemed a prize capture and the nearest armed merchant cruisers were ordered to intercept.**

**Early in the misty morning of Monday January 11 the Viknor's "man in the barrel" (crow's nest) sighted a ship to the north east of the Faroe Islands. The Viknor altered its course to head off the merchantman. As the old cruiser strained its rivets to catch up with the ship the crew noticed it looked more and more like the Bergensffjord.**

**In the clearing weather, the Viknor hoisted a red flag, which meant "stop engines" - in murkier weather a rocket or blank would be fired.**

**Nothing happened, so the Viknor fired a rocket. Loaded guns were at the ready. The crew prepared for trouble as the red flare burst across the bows of the white vessel. A live shell was next and the Viknor's guns were trained.**

**The rocket did the trick. Viknor beat to the windward side and lowered a boat with a boarding party.**

**They found that the merchant ship was indeed the Bergensffjord. Viknor radioed fellow cruisers, Alsatian, Patia and Tuetonic and they converged at full speed. They arrived at 1 PM.**

**Meanwhile the Norwegian skipper tried to bluff it out against the questions of the revolver-carrying boarding party.**

**"Why should I go into Kirkwall (the port of scrutiny) and add many days to my journey?" he said, "What will my owners say?"**

**The boarding party was unconvinced. The officers rifled through the ship's papers and the boarding party chatted to the crew to try to glean more information.**

**These investigations found nothing and the boarding party decided a thorough search was the last resort. They went through the Bergensffjord from stem to stern and found six stowaways, some hiding in a lifeboat, among 800 passengers.**

**As the boarding party searched, Baron Hans Adam von Wedell was below, disguised poorly as a Mexican and trying to burn his papers. The boarding party caught him red handed.**

**A contemporary report of the time captures the moment:** “One last touch in this drama: A few moments ago we left Von Wedell — ambitious, timorous Von Wedell — on the high seas bound for Norway. But Fate was after him. Ruroede's moment of weakness — his moment of pique, when he swore he would not shoulder all this bitterness alone — had set her on his trail. A cable message to London, a wireless from the Admiralty, and then — this entry in the logbook of the Bergensffjord for Monday, January 11 1915- All male first and second class passengers were gathered in the first-class dining saloon and their nationality inquired into. About noon, the boarding officer of the Cruiser (Viknor) went back and reported to his ship. About 0:45 P. M. he came over with orders again to take off six German stowaways and two suspected passengers. These passengers were according to ship's berth list as follows : Rosato Sprio, Mexican, Destination Bergen, Cabin 71, second-class. . . . Rosato Sprio admitted after close examination to be Baron H. A. Wedell. Claimed to be a citizen of the United States. . . . Dr. Rasmus Bjornstad claimed to be a Norwegian. . . As both passengers apparently were travelling under false pretence, the Captain did not feel justified to protest against the detention of the two passengers.”

Scrimgeour noted in his diary: “Only a tremendous bribe would have induced the captain of the Bergensffjord to risk all by contravening international law so flagrantly to bring a man like Wedell across the ditch.”

The Viknor and the other ships left in train at 6 PM. A prize crew was put aboard the Bergensffjord and they headed for Kirkwall. There were celebrations aboard the Viknor and the Commander in Chief sent a : “Well Done” message to the crew.

**Jack must have been on top of the world. The long days of freezing misery and danger had at last borne plump fruit. A warm bed in a port and a bit of leave beckoned, plus there was more prize money in the offing.**

**The Viknor telegraphed the good news and head southwards towards Liverpool. The ship was low on coal after the chase and in need of repair. At 4 PM on January 13 she called up giving a position of 56 deg 18' N, 9 deg W, of Tory Island off north western Ireland saying she was steering for the north channel and home. That was the last that was ever heard from the Viknor.**

**Scrimgeour noted in his diary on January 16: “The Viknor, with Von Wedell and the German prisoners on board is now three days overdue**

**at Liverpool; grave fears are expressed as to whether she has been blown up by a mine. It is inconceivable that Wedell has managed, with the other prisoners, to overcome his guard.”**

**This clipping from an Irish newspaper came a few days later:**

#### **Mines and lifebelts**

##### **Flotsam on Portrush Beach**

Some excitement was occasioned in Portrush on Monday morning by the discovery on the west strand of a mine and also a number of lifebelts.

The local coastguards took charge of the dangerous object and venturesome spirits were kept at a distance by the police.

Of the lifebelts, on each of which are the letters RMPSC, there are eight in all, three being washed ashore on Sunday.

It is surmised that the mine is one of the field, which was laid down off the coast of Donegal and the RMSPC are the initials of the Royal Mail Steam Packet Company.

Ballymena Observer Jan. 22 1915.

The fact that some of the crew had time to put on lifebelts indicates that the ship took time to go down. No one knows what happened. It is generally accepted that the ship went down in the dark after being struck by a mine in rough weather. SS Arabic III, previously the ‘Berlin’ built 1908 and from 18 Sept 1914 was an auxiliary cruiser in the Imperial German Navy. In October 1914 laid a minefield between Northern Ireland and Scotland. HMS Audacious was sunk by a mine in the same area.

Scrimgeour summed it all up: “Whether the ill fated vessel foundered in a gale, ran ashore, struck a mine, or was destroyed by the agency of the German prisoners on board, it will probably never be ascertained is considerable pathos attached to the event, as the Viknor was coming into harbour after a long and weary sojourn on patrol, and her officers and men were looking forward to a rest in port, and leave to their homes for many. She had, by intercepting the Bergensffjord, scored a notable success and been congratulated by the C-in-C. Thus Commander Ballantyne, her Captain, must have felt assured of promotion to Captain. Then, when almost safety she was swallowed up, and another record imprinted in the vast list of unsolved mysteries of the ocean. It is a point of some satisfaction to feel that in all probability Baron von Wedell the arch-spy the schemer of the German Secret Service, with his fellow prisoners, perished with his captors. True, the foreign newspapers report the arrival of Baron von Wedell in Rome with important documents but this is almost certainly a blind to mislead the ignorant on behalf of the German authorities, chagrined and frightened by the loss of their chief spy. Nevertheless this has given rise to a theory that von Wedell actually escaped by bribing a neutral on the Bergensffjord to impersonate him and then making an escape to Norway, or else he was a lone survivor of the Viknor...No! There can be little doubt that though in the loss of the Viknor we suffered a sad loss of valuable lives of officers and men, yet the blow to the German spy system, in the almost certain death of its prime mover, cannot be overestimated in its importance.”

Back home, the news was filtering through:

Kidderminster Shuttle 30th JAN 1915. PAGE 8

#### **Bewdley Man on the “Viknor”**

It is feared that Seaman John Bishop, of Lax Lane, Bewdley, is among those who have gone down on the *Viknor*. He was on H.M.S. *Edgar*, and was transferred to the *Viknor* in December. He was home for a few days in December, and looked fit and well.

Seaman Bishop was seventeen years of age, and is a son of Mr. John Bishop. He joined the Navy in October, 1913.

A padre and Naval officer tapped on the door at 44, Lax Lane and gave Jack's mother, Rosa, the bad tidings. We can only imagine the grief that followed. It was not uncommon in Bewdley during the war – in Lax Lane alone a dozen families were to lose their sons to the slaughter. The blow was softened slightly when one of Jack's shipmates, who must have been a member of the prize crew on the Bergensfjord, called in to Lax Lane bringing some of Jack's possessions. He told the family they had promised each other they would. Jack's family prayed he had been washed up somewhere. Their prayers were in vain. Jack Bishop left the door open every night until he died in 1927, just in case Jack came home. The family said the grief was too much for the big man and he leant heavily on the bottle until he died. On his tombstone was inscribed Jack's name, so in some way they went to the grave together.

## Chapter 12

### The Aftermath

The grief was felt by hundreds of families who lost people with the *Viknor*. Nearly a century later one of the descendants of the lost of the *Viknor* wrote: "Then came the Great War, and my father, Chief Engineer, Henry Pollard RNR joined the White Star Line's HMS *Viknor*, a merchant cruiser, on 12 December 1914. She was sunk by enemy action early in 1915 and my father was drowned at sea, his first voyage on her. Shortly after receiving the telegram notifying my mother of her loss, she gave birth to me and died, leaving me an orphan."

The Bishop family were among hundreds of thousands during the war who did not have a body to bury. Of the more than 300 sailors who went down with the *Viknor*, only a handful of bodies were recovered from the sea and a number were buried in graves in Ireland marked: "Know unto God."

Jack may be in one of these, but we will never know.

Other families were luckier in that the bodies of their loved ones were found. The family of Gunner Kenneth Galbraith has his remains removed from Ireland to be reburied in Portsmouth. These were newspaper reports of the time:-

The remains of Chief Gunner Kenneth Ballantyne, one of the *Viknor* crew, whose body was washed ashore at Ballycastle in February, and whose remains were interred in Bona-margy burying ground, were exhumed for the purpose of having them re-interred in Portsmouth, at the request of the deceased's relatives. The funeral started from Bona-margy at 3.30, and was preceded by a detachment of the Royal Irish Fusiliers, in charge of Sergeant Kane, and immediately behind came a company of the National Volunteers, under Company-Commander JE Coghlan and Half-Company Commanders Francis Black, RDC, and E Savage, followed by a company of the Ulster Volunteers, under Company-Commanders Arthur Hunter and JA Byrne and Half-Company Commander Charles Lawrence; also the postmen attached to the Ballycastle Post Office, accompanied by Mr GN Scarlett, and the local police force, in charge of Sergeant Brannigan, attended the funeral. The arrangements were superintended by Mr J Ainsworth, RN divisional officer coastguards, Ballycastle. The remains left by the 4.10 train for England.

**Gunner Kenneth Ballantyne** also started in the Navy, and so clever, and industrious, and persevering was he that he rose to the rank of chief gunner and a warrant officer. Like his brother, he has visited each hemisphere. He was on one of the ships which accompanied their Majesties on their Royal tour to India. For two years he was quartermaster on the British Ambassador's yacht at Constantinople. He took part in the Heligoland Bight fight on the H.M.S. Edgar, from which he was transferred to the H.M.S. *Viknor*, only three weeks before she was lost. His body was washed ashore at Ballycastle, Ireland, from where it was conveyed to Portsmouth, where his wife and two children reside. The funeral took place with full naval honours. He was 33 years of age.

On Saturday the remains of Chief-Gunner Kenneth Ballantyne, one of the *Viknor* crew whose body had been washed ashore at Ballycastle in February, and whose remains were interred in

Bonamargey burying-ground, were disinterred for the purpose of having them laid to rest in Portsmouth, at the request of his relatives. The funeral started from Bonamargey Abbey at 3.30pm, and was preceded by a detachment of the Royal Irish Fusiliers, in charge of Sergeant Kane, and immediately in front of the hearse was a pipers' band. A guard of honour of the naval wireless operators marched beside the hearse, and immediately behind came a company of National Volunteers, under the command of Company-Commander JE Coghlan and Half-Company Commanders Francis Black, RDC, and E Savage, followed by a company of the Ulster Volunteer Force, in command of Company-Commanders Arthur Hunter and JA Bryne and Half-Company Commander Charles Lawrence; also the postmen attached to the Ballycastle Post Office, in charge of Mr GH Scarlett; and the local police force, in charge of Sergeant Brannigan. The entire arrangements were in charge of Mr J Ainsworth, RN, Divisional Officer Coastguards, Ballycastle. Large crowds lined the road all along the route to the railway station. Numbers of visitors were much impressed with the imposing spectacle. The remains left by the 4.10pm train for Portsmouth. The arrangements were in charge of Sergeant Brannigan, who approached the several corps to attend, and who organised the pipe band for the occasion. The hearse was supplied by Mr EF McCambridge, Antrim Arms Hotel, Ballycastle.





## illustration 2: Commander Ernest Ballantyne

One of the strangest stories was the fate of Commander Ernest Ballantyne. His body was washed hundreds of miles across the Irish Sea to the coast of his native Scotland. His family had held a memorial service for him days before when a small found the body on a Dumfriesshire beach.

The remains were taken home to Dalkeith for a burial with full military honours.

From the Dalkeith Advertiser.

The remains of Commander Ernest Orford Ballantyne, 38, were taken from the Ashton, Eskbank, home of his brother, Harold, to Dalkeith Cemetery. The family had given up hope and had held a memorial service for him days before his body was washed up at Port Castle Bay in Dumfries. The remains were carried aboard a destroyer to Mallaig, where they were identified by his brother.

More than four thousand people lined the streets at the funeral, with full naval honours, at Dalkeith Cemetery. All the shops closed and people drew their blinds and wore black.

The coffin, made of polished ash and mounted with brass, was carried on a gun carriage and draped with a Union Flag. A party of blue jackets from HMS Indomitable march behind. On the coffin, were wreaths from a number of fighting ships, including one of white heather and another of Nile lilies.

At the head of the funeral procession was a large contingent of Royal Scots, with slow and measured tread and with arms reversed. A pipe band playing "Scots Wha Hae" followed behind. Then, there was a brass band of the South Wales Borderers, who were stationed in nearby Edinburgh at the time.

Behind all of these was the gun carriage, provided by the Lowland Field Artillery, drawn by half-a-dozen "lithe-limbed horses" and led by a mounted officer. Then came the mourners, led by the father, Alexander Ballantyne, also a doctor.

Bringing up the rear was a body of general mourners including businessmen, professionals, politicians and a contingent of the Royal Marine Light Infantry.

A soldier in Khaki limped with the aid of a stick at the rear of the procession, along with a number of wounded men home from the front.

The mourners passed between two lines of Territorial soldiers, who stood motionless, with the muzzles of their rifles resting on their boots and their heads bent over the butts of their weapons. The Territorials fired three volleys over the grave, while a bugle sounded the last post.

Hundreds of people visited the grave in the following days.

There were questions in Parliament about the *Viknor* from a lord who had a reputation for campaigns and tough questions. Charles Beresford was the second son of the 4th Marquis of Waterford. He joined the Royal Navy in 1859 and started his training as a cadet at the naval training academy HMS Britannia. He became a lieutenant in 1874. He was a well-known and popular figure who courted publicity. He was widely known to the British public as "Charlie B" and considered by many to be a kind of personification of John Bull and indeed was normally accompanied by his trademark, a bulldog.

Lord Beresford was to grill the First Lord of the Admiralty and future British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill.

He asked whether His Majesty's ship "*Viknor*" was surveyed after she was armed; whether the Government were quite satisfied that she was absolutely seaworthy; and whether there will be any inquiry with regard to her loss?

Mr Churchill

The hull and machinery of the ship were thoroughly surveyed while she was being fitted out and armed, and on completion her stability was tested. The Admiralty officers responsible were quite satisfied that the ship was in all respects seaworthy. As there are no survivors no formal inquiry can be held.

Lord C Beresford.

asked the First Lord of the Admiralty whether he is aware that there are ten survivors of His Majesty's Ship "Viknor" who were nineteen days in that ship and left her as a prize crew on the 18th January; and whether the Board of Admiralty will reconsider their decision not to have an inquiry into the loss of the ship?

Dr Macnamara

I do not think that the members of the crew referred to can, strictly speaking, be termed survivors. In any case they are not in a position to throw any light on the circumstances in which this vessel was lost, not having been on board her at the time.

Lord C Beresford

There is great doubt about the seaworthiness of this ship. Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that one sub-lieutenant, one signalman, four seamen, and three Marines, a total of nine, only left the ship a short time before, and they are all capable of giving evidence as to the seaworthiness of the ship?

Dr Macnamara

The Noble Lord will remember that the First Lord answered a question on this point the other day.

Lord C Beresford

There may be a mistake. The question is so serious that I ask the right hon. Gentleman if he will reconsider the matter?

Dr Macnamara

I cannot. On the question of seaworthiness I cannot add anything to the reply of the First Lord.

Nothing was done and no one knows for sure where the wreck is. The nearest we know is the result of diving by an underwater expert Jan Lettens who surveyed the wreck on 13/01/2008 – the 95<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the sinking, just off Tory Island and off the rocks of the Bloody Foreshore.

**He said:** “I don't know whether she has been found yet, but it should not be too difficult to locate with Sonar. While researching on maritime charts, I found a 'mountain' coming up to 49m LLWS in a region where the ocean depth is about 80m. This could be her. It should be possible to dive her with high-technology diving gear.”

Let's hope one day it will be and the mystery can be solved.

Chris Bishop

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