

Tragic Slip Near The Verne Citadel Portland

PLY/7891 Private Walter Briggs ~ Royal Marine Light Infantry

Walter Briggs was born on the 10th June, 1878 at Killington, Grantham, Lincolnshire, the fourth son of William and Mary Briggs. The Census for 1881 recorded that the family were living in the civil parish of Sedgebrook, Lincolnshire and the members of the household were William, aged 46 years, Mary his wife, aged 35 years, sons George, John, William, Walter aged 11, 7, 6 and 5 respectively, daughters Emma aged 9, Mary aged 3 and Flora aged 1 year. Walter, if he had been born in 1878 would have been aged 3 years – the census for 1881 gives two estimated dates for his birth – possibly indicating that the census recorder may have been given the wrong year by his parents or instead of a 3 inserted a 5, which might account for the error as to Walter’s real age at that time. It is also apparent that no street, road address or house number has been recorded other than simply how many households had been visited. William, their father was born at Great Ponton, Lincolnshire and was employed as a Horseman’s Labourer. His wife Mary, who was born at Besthorpe, Nottinghamshire is listed as a Horseman’s Wife. All their children except Mary and Flora were ‘scholars’.

At the age of 18 years, Walter enlisted at Lincoln into the Royal Marine Light Infantry (Plymouth Division) on the 18th March, 1896 initially for a 12 years engagement. He re-engaged on the 10th June 1908 to complete his service for pension. Walter was described on his service record as being 5-ft 6-inches in height – (by the time of his re-engagement he had grown by one-inch) – had a fresh complexion, brown hair, blue eyes, distinguishing marks were a scar on his forehead and two smaller scars on his back. He gave his occupation as that of a barber, religion, Church of England and firstly nominated his father as next-of-kin and later his sister Emma. Details of his service were as follows:-

<u>Rank</u>	<u>Company</u>	<u>Division or Ship</u>	<u>Entry</u>	<u>Discharge</u>	<u>Character/Ability</u>
Private	‘J’	Walmer Depot	18 Mar 1896	20 Oct 1896	Very Good
Private	‘C’	Plymouth Div.	21 Oct 1896	31 Dec 1896	Very Good
Private	‘C’	Plymouth Div.	1 Jan 1897	30 Mar 1897	Very Good
Private	‘C’	HMS Vivid	1 Apr 1897	31 Dec 1897	Very Good
Private	‘C’	HMS Vivid	1 Jan 1898	31 Mar 1898	Very Good

Private	'C'	Plymouth Div.	1 Apr 1898	29 Jun 1898	Very Good
Private	'C'	HMS Vivid	30 Jun 1898	31 Dec 1898	Very Good
Private	'C'	HMS Vivid	1 Jan 1899	31 Dec 1899	Very Good
Private	'C'	HMS Vivid	1 Jan 1900	31 Dec 1900	Very Good
Private	'C'	HMS Vivid	1 Jan 1901	21 Apr 1901	Very Good
Private	'C'	Plymouth Div.	22 Apr 1901	31 Dec 1901	Very Good
Private	'C'	Plymouth Div.	1 Jan 1902	31 Dec 1902	Very Good
Private	'C'	Plymouth Div.	1 Jan 1903	31 Dec 1903	Very Good
Private	'C'	Plymouth Div.	1 Jan 1904	31 Dec 1904	Very Good
Private	'C'	Plymouth Div.	1 Jan 1905	31 Dec 1905	Very Good
Private	'C'	Plymouth Div.	1 Jan 1906	18 Sep 1906	Very Good
Private	'C'	HMS Emerald	19 Sep 1906	31 Dec 1906	Very Good
Private	'C'	HMS Emerald	1 Jan 1907	31 Dec 1907	Very Good
Private	'C'	HMS Emerald	1 Jan 1908	19 Dec 1908	Very Good
Private	'C'	Plymouth Div.	20 Dec 1908	31 Dec 1908	Very Good
Private	'C'	Plymouth Div.	1 Jan 1909	24 Feb 1909	Very Good
Private	'C'	HMS Hermes	25 Feb 1909	31 Dec 1909	Very Good
Private	'C'	HMS Hermes	1 Jan 1910	31 Dec 1910	Very Good
Private	'C'	HMS Hermes	1 Jan 1911	12 Apr 1911	Very Good
Private	'C'	HMS Vindictive	13 Apr 1911	6 May 1911	Very Good
Private	'C'	Plymouth Div.	7 May 1911	12 Jun 1911	Very Good
Private	'C'	HMS Carnarvon	13 Jun 1911	24 Jul 1911	Very Good
Private	'C'	Plymouth Div.	25 Jul 1911	7 Aug 1911	Very Good
Private	'C'	HMS Cambrian	8 Aug 1911	31 Dec 1911	Very Good

Private	‘C’	HMS Cambrian	1 Jan 1912	31 Dec 1912	Very Good
Private	‘C’	HMS Cambrian	1 Jan 1913	31 Dec 1913	Very Good
Private	‘C’	HMS Cambrian	1 Jan 1914	17 Jan 1914	Very Good
Private	‘C’	Plymouth Div.	18 Jan 1914	3 May 1914	Very Good
Private	‘C’	Plymouth Depot	4 May 1914	9 Jul 1914	Very Good
Private	‘C’	Plymouth Div.	10 Jul 1914	12 Jul 1914	Very Good
Private	‘C’	HMS London	13 Jul 1914	24 Jul 1914	Very Good
Private	‘C’	Plymouth Div.	25 Jul 1914	29 Jul 1914	Very Good
Private	‘C’	HMS London	30 Jul 1914	31 Dec 1914	Very Good
Private	‘C’	HMS London	1 Jan 1915	11 Jan 1915	Discharged Dead

Walter’s character and ability was marked as ‘Very Good’ and ‘Superior’ and he was able to swim having been tested at the Depot on the 28th August, 1896. There is no indication as to whether he gained any school certificates but he had passed his musketry course, gunnery drills and relevant revisions. He had qualified to give first aid to the injured and gained four Good Conduct Badges, the first on the 10th June, 1898, the second of the 10th June, 1902, the third on the 8th June, 1908 and the fourth on the 5th June, 1912. On the 31st November, 1912 he was awarded his Long Service and Good Conduct Medal whilst serving on HMS Cambrian.

As can be seen from his service record Private Walter Briggs served in warships of the Royal Navy and shore establishments with Royal Marine Light Infantry. The following are brief details about those warships and establishments.



Grave Of Private Walter Briggs RMLI

Plymouth Division ~ Stonehouse Barracks

Troops from the Royal Marines have been stationed at Plymouth and nearby Plymouth Docks since the formation of the Corps in 1664. When first permanently established in 1755 the Royal Marines were formed into three divisions based in the three principle Royal Naval Dockyards, Portsmouth, Chatham and Plymouth. In 1762 the Royal Navy built a hospital at Stonehouse and a bridge across Stonehouse Creek giving access to Plymouth Dock. Stonehouse also provided the opportunity for a military barracks and a site at Mill Bay was chosen. Construction of the barracks commenced in 1781 comprising three accommodation blocks around a parade ground and a guard room on the fourth side. First occupied in 1783 extra accommodation and extensions were added over subsequent years including rebuilding of the north block. In 1867 a new west block and a Divisional School were completed. Stonehouse the base of the Plymouth Division and ‘spiritual home of the marines’ has seen many changes over succeeding decades and today is the base of the 3 Commando Brigade. Occupied by Plymouth based Royal Marines for over three hundred years Stonehouse Barracks is due to be closed in 2027.

HMS Vivid

This was the Royal Navy’s shore base at Devonport, established in 1890 and operated as a training unit until 1914. The base was renamed HMS Drake in 1934. A number of warships were named HMS Vivid whilst serving as depot ships for the base. Since 1959 it has been the base of the Royal Naval Reserve.

HMS Emerald

Originally named HMS Black Prince, she was a Warrior-class armoured frigate of 9,137-tons and was the second armoured warship following her sister-ship HMS Warrior. Laid down in October 1859 at Robert Napier & Sons Govan Yard, Glasgow she was completed in September 1862. The Warrior-class warships were powered by a single steam engine and her three masts rigged for sails, achieving a speed of 11-knots. She served with the Channel Fleet until 1896 when she was hulked and became a training ship based at Queenstown, Ireland. Re-classified as an armoured cruiser she was renamed HMS Emerald in 1903. Based at Plymouth in 1910, she was again renamed HMS Impregnable III for use as a training ship and finally scrapped in 1923.

HMS Hermes

One of three Highflyer-class armoured protected light cruisers of 5,650-tons, she was laid down at Fairfield Shipbuilding and Engineering Company at Govan in April 1897. Coal fired, her machinery consisted of 2 x 4-cylinder triple expansion steam engines, with a designed H.P.

10,000 achieving a speed of 19½-knots. Her main armament was 11 x Single QF 6-inch guns, 8 x Single QF 12-pounders guns, 6 x Single QF 3-pounder guns and 2 x 18-inch Torpedoes. Completed in October 1899 she became a flagship at several foreign stations before returning to the United Kingdom in 1913 and assigned to the 3rd Reserve Fleet. She was modified during that year as the first experimental seaplane carrier in the Royal Navy to evaluate if aircraft could co-operate with the fleet. After successful sea trials she was paid off. Re-commissioned on the outbreak of the First World War she was used as a depot ship and for ferrying aircraft for the RNAS. On the 31st October, 1914 HMS Hermes was torpedoed and sunk by the German submarine U-27 in the Dover Straits with a significant loss of life.

HMS Vindictive

An Arrogant-class cruiser of 5,750-tons she was launched at Chatham Dockyard in December 1897 and completed in 1899. Coal fired and powered by two triple steam expansion engines she was able to achieve a speed of 19-knots. Assigned to the Mediterranean Squadron she participated in naval manoeuvres with the Channel Fleet. After completion of a refit in 1910 she was transferred to the 3rd Division of the Home Fleet and two years later used as a tender for the training establishment HMS Vernon. Virtually obsolescent by the outbreak of the First World War she was allocated to the 9th Cruiser Squadron. In 1915 she was stationed on the South East Coast of America Station. In 1837 the South America Station was divided into the Pacific Station and the South East Coast Of America Station. The latter was based at Port Stanley for the Royal Navy between 1838 and 1904. It was re-established in September 1914 and was an essential for the operations associated with the sea Battles of Coronel and the Falklands. From 1916 to 1917 HMS Vindictive operated in the White Sea and in early 1918 she was fitted out for the Zeebrugge Raid of the 23rd April, 1918. Severely damaged during the raid she was sunk as a block-ship at Ostend on the 10th May, 1918. The wreck was raised in August 1920 and the bow section preserved at Ostend as a memorial. Together with many awards and decorations eleven Victoria Crosses were awarded for the Zeebrugge and Ostend operations.

HMS Carnarvon

One of six Devonshire-class armoured cruisers, built by William Beardmore & Company at Dalmuir. She was laid down in October 1902, and completed three years later. Displacing 10,850-tons, powered by two 4-cylinder triple-expansion engines, coal and oil fired, with a designed H.P. of 20,500 she achieved a speed of 22-knots. Her armament consisted of 4 x Single BL 7.5-inch Mk I Guns, 6 x Single BL 6-inch Mk VII Guns, 2 x 12-pounder guns, 18 x 3-pounder guns and 2 x 18-inch Torpedoes. HMS Carnarvon served with the 3rd Cruiser Squadron

of the Mediterranean Fleet and the 2nd Cruiser Squadron of the Atlantic Fleet. Transferred in 1909 to the 3rd Reserve Fleet she became the flagship of the 5th Cruiser Squadron of the 2nd Reserve Fleet in 1912. On the outbreak of the First World War she was assigned to the Cape Verde Station to protect British shipping and search for German commerce raiders. Ordered to proceed to Port Stanley, HMS Carnarvon was an active participant in the Battle of the Falklands in December 1914. After searching for the elusive German light cruiser Dresden HMS Carnarvon struck a reef off Brazil in February 1915 and had to be beached to avoid sinking. Temporarily repaired at Rio de Janeiro she had more permanent repairs in Montreal, Canada. She then undertook escort duties to the United Kingdom and returned to Halifax where she remained for the remainder of 1915. Based on the North America and West Indies Station, she resumed patrolling duties to protect British shipping until the end of the war. In 1919 she was used as a sea-going training ship for cadets and scrapped in 1921.

HMS Cambrian

A Second-Class armoured protected Cruiser laid down at Pembroke Dockyard in 1891 and launched in January 1893. Displacing 4,360-tons she was powered by two triple expansion steam engines, and capable of 18-knots (natural draught) and 23-knot (forced draught). Her early years were spent on the South East Coast of America Station. Transferred firstly to the Mediterranean and then to the Australian Station where she remained until 1913. Returning to the United Kingdom she was paid off and underwent a conversion into a base ship and renamed HMS Harlech in March 1916, HMS Vivid in 1921 and was sold and scrapped two years later.

HMS London

H.M.S. London was one of three "London" class battleships laid down at Portsmouth on the 8th December, 1898, launched on the 21st September, 1899 and completed in June 1902. Her technical details were as follows:-

Dimensions ~ Length Overall 430-ft; Length at the Waterline 411-ft; Beam 75-ft; Maximum Draft 29-ft;

Displacement ~ 15,000-tons;

Guns ~ 4 x BL 12-inch Mark IX, 40 Calibre; 12 x BL 6-inch Mark VII, 45 Calibre; 16 x 12-pounder (12-cwt); 2 x 12-pounder (8-cwt); 6 x 3-pounder; 2 x Maximum Guns; 4 x 18-inch Torpedoes (Submerged);

Ammunition Carried ~ 12-inch (80 rounds per gun); 6-inch (200 rounds per gun);

Armour (Krupp) ~ 9-inch Belt (Amidships); 6-inch to 2-inch Belt (Bow); 12-inch After Bulkhead; 3-inch (Deck); Protection to Vitals – 12-inch Barbettes; 10-inch to 8-inch Turrets; 6-inch Casemates; 12-inch Conning Tower; Total Weight 4,295-tons; Armour Belt 15-wide by 300-ft long from bow;

Machinery ~ 2 sets of 3 Cylinder Vertical Inverted Triple Expansion Engines; 2 x Propellers; 20 x Bellville Water-Tube Boilers; Steam Pressure at Boilers 300lbs/sq.in; Steam Pressure at Engines 250lbs/sq.in; Designed H.P. 15,000 = 18-knots;

Fuel ~ Coal – Normal 900-tons; Maximum 2,100-tons;

Average Coal Consumption ~ 8.25-tons/hour at 10,000 H.P = 15-knots; 11.75-tons/hour at 15,000 H.P. = 18-knots;

Average Building ~ £1,000,000/ship

Complement ~ 750 Officers & Ratings; As Flagship 789 Officers & Ratings;

Commissioned ~ 7th June 1902;

After commissioning, HMS London left Portsmouth in July for service in the Mediterranean. Whilst serving there she underwent two refits at Malta before returning in March 1907 to the United Kingdom and was transferred to the Nore Division of the Home Fleet and then as flagship of the Channel Fleet in June 1908. Refitted during the same year HMS London was paid off in April 1909 and had a major refit at Chatham. Re-commissioned in February 1910 she became the 2nd Flagship of the Atlantic Fleet. As part of the fleet reorganisation on the 1st May, 1912, she became part of the Second Home Fleet at the Nore, with a reduced crew and transferred to the 3rd Battle Squadron. On the 11th May, 1912 she collided with a merchant vessel the SS Don Benite. She was assigned to the 5th Battle Squadron and used in experiments flying off aircraft from May 1912 until 1913 with a ramp erected over her forecastle which had been removed from the battleship HMS Hibernia. Commander Charles Samson who had made the world's first take off from a moving ship in May 1912 from HMS Hibernia using a Short Improved S.27 biplane on the same ramp repeated his feat by taking off in the same aircraft from HMS London on the 4th July, 1912 whilst the ship was underway.

On the outbreak of the First World War in August 1914, the 5th Battle Squadron was transferred to the Channel Fleet and based at Portland. Their first task was to escort the BEF across the Channel. In November, the 5th Battle Squadron was transferred to Sheerness to counter any possible threat of a German invasion. Whilst deployed there, the battleship HMS Bulwark

exploded and HMS London's crew helped to search for survivors. The enquiry into the cause of the explosion was held aboard HMS London. At the end of December 1914 the 5th Battle Squadron returned to Portland.

In January 1915, the British and French navies began to send warships to the Eastern Mediterranean for operations against the Ottoman Empire. A number of warships were drawn from the 5th Battle Squadron but HMS London remained at Portland. Due to losses at the Dardanelles the 5th Battle Squadron was disbanded and HMS London departed in March to join the Eastern Mediterranean Fleet for the Gallipoli campaign.

Private Walter Briggs was drafted to HMS London on the 13th July, 1914 for just ten days and returned ashore to the Plymouth Division. Although he rejoined the ship on the 30th July, he was not to serve with his comrades in the Eastern Mediterranean having died aged 36 in January 1915.

In 1916 HMS London returned to the United Kingdom and was laid up for a refit. In February 1918 she was converted to a minelayer and painted with experimental dazzle camouflage paint. Re-commissioned at Rosyth in May 1918 she joined the Grand Fleet's 1st Mine Laying Squadron, subsequently laying over 2,500 mines in the Northern Mine Barrage. Placed in reserve at Devonport in January 1919 she was placed on the sale list the following year. Sold firstly in June 1920 to ship breakers, who sold her again before she was finally sold to a German company and scrapped in the Spring of 1922.

Private Walter Briggs had an unblemished service career with the Royal Marine Light Infantry, which after almost 19 years was suddenly and tragically brought to an end on the 11th January, 1915.

Southern Times ~ Saturday, 16th January, 1915.

Marines Sudden Death ~ A Fall On The Footpath

On Tuesday the Coroner (Mr G.P. Symes) held an inquest at the Royal Naval Hospital upon Walter Briggs, a private of the Marine Light Infantry of H.M.S. —, who died on Monday morning in the military hospital at the Verne, where he had been conveyed on Sunday evening. The Admiralty was, represented by the Local Law Agent (Mr H.A. Huxtable of Weymouth), and the inquiry was also attended by two officers of the ship. Mr Edward Comben, of Fortuneswell was chosen foreman of the jury. Evidence was given by Harry Cooper, a private of the R.M.L.I. of H.M.S. —, who said deceased was a private of the same ship. He was 36 and he was a single man, a native of Grantham, but whose home address was Portland.

On Sunday afternoon deceased, whom witness had known for nearly 18 years came ashore with witness and another man at two p.m. They had two glasses of ale each and then went to visit deceased's sister, Mrs Whisker, at the Grove, arriving there at 3.15. At 4 p.m. they started back, coming over the path between the prison and the Verne. Just where the new wall had been built and had blown down, deceased, who was a little behind, slipped and fell backwards and caught the back of his head against the new wall now being built. He was rendered unconscious at once. Witness and Private Martin picked him up and witness went back to the prison to ask for a doctor to come with him. The doctor came and examined the man, and some civilians passing were asked to get a stretcher from the Verne to carry him there. Witness followed him there, and when at the Verne he was asked by the nurse to search deceased to see what money he had on him. It was a pure accident. There was no skylarking going on and all three were quite sober. Deceased never spoke again after falling.

By Mr Huxtable: Witness and deceased were chums. Deceased went to his sister to give her some money, her husband being called up on active service. Private W. Martin, of the same ship, who was also present said deceased slipped by



Grave Of Private Walter Briggs RMLI

treading on a stone and fell backwards. He corroborated the evidence of Cooper.

The Coroner: The Captain of the ship states the men were perfectly sober when they came aboard on Sunday evening.

Dr H.R. Henley medical officer in charge of the troops and of the military hospital at Portland said on Sunday evening deceased was brought to the hospital suffering from concussion of the brain, but there were no marks of external violence. Three hours later symptoms of compression of the brain set in and he died at 3.10 a.m. on Monday morning, the cause being cerebral haemorrhage, causing compression of the brain and consequent failure of respiration, the result of a fall.

Deceased was a heavy man of 14 stone and 6-ft high. In answer to the Foreman, the two marine witnesses said as soon as the prison doctor was called he came immediately.

The Foreman: I am glad to hear that because we have all heard so many rumours of delay in this case.

The Coroner expressed the sympathy of the jury to Mrs (Emma) Whisker, the deceased's sister, who was present at the inquiry. The jury then returned a verdict of "Accidental Death."

Note: — Due to the war disclosure of information thought to be helpful to the enemy the name of the warship was censored and omitted.

Private Walter Briggs was buried in Portland Royal Naval Cemetery on the 13th January, with full military honours. Grave Location: Plot No.539.

Portland Royal Naval Cemetery

Portland Harbour is a manmade harbour attached to the north of Portland. Originally it was a natural anchorage known as Portland Roads, protected by Portland to the south, Chesil Beach to the west and mainland Dorset to the north. Portland Roads was transformed into a naval base following the building of two breakwater arms in the mid-19th century. The Cemetery was established by the War Office in 1876 for the burial of the soldiers garrisoned at Verne Citadel (part of the harbour defence fortifications) and Royal Navy sailors based at Portland. In 1907 the site was transferred to the Admiralty, who went on to extend the site to the west in 1914.

Throughout the First World War, Portland Harbour was used regularly for training exercises and patrols for German U-boats. There are 67 burials from the First World War, 50 of which are unidentified. In addition, there is a Special Memorial to a casualty buried in Portland (St George) Churchyard. After the War the maintenance of the Cemetery was passed to the Imperial War Graves Commission and in November 1926, the Cross of Sacrifice was unveiled in the presence of detachments from ships stationed at Portland and the local garrison. With the outbreak of the Second World War, Portland continued hosting training exercises. However, after Germany's successful invasion of France, the naval base quickly became the target of air attacks. On the 4th July, 1940 HMS Foylebank was attacked while at Portland Harbour, which resulted in her sinking on the 5th. Over 70 crew members lost their lives, some of whom are buried at Portland Royal Naval Cemetery, the rest are commemorated on memorials to the missing. By May 1944, both Portland Harbour and Weymouth Harbour were used as part of the D-Day preparations. They were major embarkation points for American troops, particularly the US 1st Division who embarked for 'Omaha Beach' in June 1944. There are 103 burials

(including 1 Norwegian Merchant Navy seaman and 12 German airmen) 10 of which are unidentified, from the Second World War, the majority of which are in the Church of England section, near the Cross of Sacrifice. The Cemetery was extended eastwards in the mid-20th century, where many post-Second World War burials are found. In 1996 the Naval Base at Portland was closed.

Walter's sister Mrs Emma Whisker received he brother's war gratuity payment and a brother his 1914-15 Star, British War Medal 1914-1920, Allied Victory Medal 1914-1920, Bronze Memorial Plaque and Scroll.

+++

Sources

Jane's Fighting Ships Of World War I. First Published in 1919 by Jane's Publishing Company. Republished in 1990 by Studio Editions Limited. Princess House, 50 Eastcastle Street, London W1N 7AP. ISBN 1 851700 378 0.

Southern Times Newspaper ~ Saturday 16th January, 1915.

Commonwealth War Graves Commission Web-Site ~ www.cwgc.org

National Archives ~ Service Record Private Walter Briggs RMLI ~ ADM 159/73/7891

National Archives ~ UK Naval Medal & Awards 1793-1972 – Private Walter Briggs RMLI
ADM 171/167

Wikipedia Web—Site ~ www.wikipedia.org

Photographs ~ ©Roger Coleman

R.G. Coleman