

# Brave Report



*HM Submarine K2*

## Northern Ireland's First World War submariners

Men from Northern Ireland served in HM Submarines from the outbreak of the war. The development of submarines in the Royal Navy was not apace historically of Germany, France or the USA. Indeed due to a mentality based on its belief in its superiority in surface ships, the UK for a time tried to get submarine warfare regarded as

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an international war crime. Other nations did not accept the UK's position. Consequently, resources to develop submarines were slower to become available.



***The K class were involved in 16 major accidents and any number of minor mishaps. One, the K13 sank on her trials in the Gareloch and her salvage was a feat for the day. Barrow Submariners Assoc.***

There was also debate within the leadership of the navy as to the role and relevance of submarines. One view being that they were best suited to observation prior to engagements by surface craft. The development of the submarine as a weapon of war is one of the major outcomes of the First World War and especially in Germany where the role of whose surface fleet had been so negated in the degree to which it had been confined to port.

Regardless of the bigger pictures, submarines developed technologically and strategically. These developments were not without cost in terms of human lives.

## **The Battle of May**

Three submariners from Belfast were lost in a tragic incident in 1918 which became known as the Battle of May - a catastrophe that left 270 RN dead. Isaac Gibson from Argyll Place and John McDonald whose father was based at Chichester Street Fire Station, were in HM Submarine K17 and Joseph Hayes from Shaftesbury Street was in HM Submarine K4.

The two K Class submarines were destroyed on 31/01/1918 when they were sunk and three more were damaged along with a surface cruiser.

No enemy ships were involved in the sinkings, 20 miles off Fife Ness on Scotland's east coast. The deaths were all caused by a series of night-time collisions within the British fleet.

So embarrassing was the incident that even though one officer was court-martialled, the facts



were not generally admitted for more than 60 years, until after the death of the last survivor.

Jim Rae, secretary of the Scottish branch of the Submariners' Association said: "It was an absolute bloody disaster from the beginning. The K Class submarines did not have a very impressive record. You can see why those who served in them were known as the suicide club."

The submarines proved far more lethal to their crews than to the enemy, so much so that the K was said to stand for Kalamity. Driven by oil-fired steam turbine engines, they were large and

cumbersome, too slow to keep up with surface ships, hard to manoeuvre and stifling for their crews. Of the 18 that were built, none were lost in action but six were sunk in accidental collisions.

In January 1918, as British warships steamed north from Rosyth to join their fleet at Scapa Flow in the Orkneys, they were accompanied by two flotillas of the submarines. The first two subs found themselves bearing down on two minesweepers and changed course. The third, K14, veered to starboard to avoid colliding with them but performed a complete circle as its rudder jammed.

That brought it back into line just in time to be rammed by the last submarine in the group, K22. A battlecruiser, HMS Inflexible, then ploughed into K22.

The first ships in the convoy turned back to rescue the submarines and steamed straight into the chaos. A cruiser, HMS Fearless, rammed K17, another of the subs, sinking it within eight minutes. Then two further submarines, K4 and K6, collided. To complete the disaster, a destroyer then carved through the survivors of K17, killing many of those who had been left in

the water. The entire 59-man crew of K4 was lost and all but eight of K17's.



### **HM Submarine K2**

The Royal Navy hushed up the catastrophe and it was not until 2002 that a commemorative plaque was erected on a cairn in Anstruther, the nearest village on the coast, though even that does not refer to the cause of the loss of life. The Submariners' Association however, now holds an annual commemorative service.

## **Lost ten days before the end of the war**

Charles Clements from Omagh, an Engine Room Artificer, was lost in HM Submarine G7 on 01/11/1918 just ten days before the end of the war. He had served in the Dardanelles and at the Battles of Dogger Bank, Helig and Jutland.

Like the rest of her class, G7's role was to patrol the North Sea in search of German U-boats. Communications were lost on 23rd October. She was declared lost on 1st November, just ten days before the end of the war. Sailing out of Blyth in Northumberland, she was part of a flotilla of ten submarines stationed there. Her commanding officer was Lt Charles Russell and there were 30 officers and men on board.

Conditions at sea are described by another submariner working at Blyth at this time. *'The wind was rough and the sea mountainous. The motion of the boat was a perpetual swinging, swaying, racking, rolling and listing. Inside the humidity was intolerable; moisture condensing on the cold steel hull ran in streaks to the bilges; food turned rotten and had to be thrown overboard. Bread became soggy and mildewy. Paper dissolved. Our clothes were clammy and never dry and whatever we touched was wet and slimy. The air we breathed was a mixture of hydrogen and chlorine from the batteries, foul air, the smells of cooking and unwashed bodies, of arsenic and oil fuel and finally carbon monoxide. No wonder we hardly spoke to each other.'* The same account also recalled *'G7 set off on patrol and was never heard of again. Probably struck a*



### ***HM Submarine G7***

*mine, and they had been such a fine jolly crew'. Just eight days before contact was lost with G7 another submarine J6, was sunk by a British ship in an incident of 'friendly fire'. Only fifteen men were rescued out of a crew of forty-five. Recently the wreck of this submarine has been discovered by divers.*

## **HM SUBMARINES - WORLD WAR 1 ROLL OF HONOUR - ON ETERNAL PATROL**

### **BRADLEY, Frederick Ekin**

RNR. Leading Stoker. 302220. HM Submarine D5. Died 03/12/1914. Age 29. Born about 1885 in County Donegal. He had previously served during the Boer War. He had also served

in HMS Hyacinth in the Somali Expedition. HMS D5 was a British D class submarine built by Vickers, Barrow. D5 was laid down on 23/2/1910, launched 28/8/1911 and was commissioned 19/2/1911. Submarine HMS D5 was sunk by a British mine two miles south of South Cross Buoy off Great Yarmouth in the North Sea. 20 officers and men were lost. There were only 5 survivors including her Commanding Officer Lt. Cdr. Godfrey Herbert. Son of William and Jane Bradley. The 1911 census shows Frederick's father had retired and was receiving a Royal Irish Regiment pension. The family was then living in Charlemont near the Moy, Tyrone. Frederick was married to Lillian J. Bradley, Stonehouse, Plymouth. Plymouth Naval Memorial Panel 3. Moy WM.

### **CLEMENTS, Charles Sproule**

RN. Engine Room Artificer 3rd Class. 272451. HM Submarine G7. Died 01/11/1918. Age 27. HMS G7 was a British G class submarine. Like the rest of her class, G7's role was to patrol the North Sea in search of German U-boats. In October 1918 G7 was on patrol in the North Sea. Communications were lost on 23 October and she was declared lost on 1 November. Charles Clements served in the Dardanelles and at the Battles of Dogger Bank, Helig and Jutland. Born Drumragh, County Tyrone. Son of David A. Clements and Sarah Clements, Dublin Rd., Omagh. Omagh Masonic Lodge RH. Chatham Naval Memorial. First Omagh - PCI RH

### **GIBSON, Isaac**

RN. Chief Engine Room Artificer. 2nd Class. 270632. HM Submarine K17. Died 31/01/1918. Age 39. K17 was sunk on 31/01/1918 during the night time fleet exercises later known as the Battle of May Island. (Operation E.C.1) when she was attached to the 13th Submarine Flotilla. HMS Fearless ploughed into K17 at the head of a line of submarines. She

sank in about 8 minutes with the loss of all hands. Born Downpatrick. Son of Samuel and Charlotte Gibson, Belfast; husband to Ellen Duncan Gibson, Sidney St., Saltcoats, Ayrshire. Plymouth Naval Memorial. Tennent Street, Argyll Place - PCI RH

**HAYES, Joseph Charles**

RN. Stoker 1st Class. K19004. HM Submarine K4. Died 31/01/1918. Age 24. Born Belfast. Son of Joseph Charles Hayes, Belfast; husband to Minnie Hayes, Shaftesbury St., Belfast. Chatham Naval Memorial.

**KEANE, Ernest John**

RN. 225445. HM Submarine B9. Died 05/08/1915. Age 27. HMS B9 was built at Vickers, Barrow-in-Furness, launched 24/01/1906 and completed 28/04/1906. B9 was deployed to the Mediterranean soon after the outbreak of World War 1. Due to the lack of spare parts this group of submarines were not used after September 1915. In 1917 the Italian Navy converted B9 into to surface patrol boat S9 to serve in the Adriatic. On 29/03/1916 B9 was attacked by Austrian aircraft.

**McCARTNEY, Daniel**

RN. Leading Stoker. K3632. HM Submarine G8. Died 03/01/1918. Age 26. Like the rest of her class, G8's role was to patrol the North Sea in search of German U-boats. G8 was lost in the North Sea on 14 January 1918; the reasons remain unknown. Born Belfast. Son of Daniel and Margaret McCartney, Wigton St., Belfast. Chatham Naval Memorial, Panel 29

**McDONALD, John Riddell**

Stoker 1st Class. SS114477. HM Submarine K17. Died 31/01/1918. Age 24. Born Belfast. Son of Hugh G. and Sarah J.

McDonald, Central Fire Station, Chichester St., Belfast.  
Chatham Naval Memorial. Rosemary St. - PCI RH

**McDOWELL, William**

Leading Seaman. 211344. HM Submarine E5. Died 11/03/1916. Age 33. E5 had a very short career before and after her commissioning. She had an engine room explosion on 08/06/1913, 20 days before commissioning. 13 were killed. E5 was lost on 7 March 1916 while rescuing the survivors of trawler Resono just north of Juist in the North Sea, apparently striking a mine, possibly after straying into a German minefield upon being sighted by the German light cruiser Regensburg. Others have attributed her loss to depth charge attack by torpedo boats escorting the battlecruiser Seyditz. Born Templecorran, County Antrim. Son of Eliza McDowell, of Milebush, Ballyhill, Carrickfergus, and the late William McDowell. Portsmouth Naval Memorial. Carrickfergus WM

## HM SUBMARINES WORLD WAR 1 THEY SERVED

**CARROL, George A.**

RN. Lieutenant. HMS Alecto. Submarine service. Masonic Lodge 41, Larne. Whitehead - PCI RH

**DYER, Joseph**

AB. Submarine Service. Wounded. Kilronan Street, Belfast. Newington - PCI RH

**MAGOWAN, Robert**

RN. Stoker. HM Submarine 8. Vistula Street, Belfast. Crumlin Road - PCI RH

**McCADDEN, W G**

RN. LS. Award. Submarine. Craigmore St., Belfast

**McCARTNEY, James**

RN. AB. Submarine E56. Ballymagee Street, Bangor. Hamilton Road - PCI RH

**SPIERS, John**

RN. Submarines. Belfast

**Acknowledgments** - The Guardian; Masonic Order RH; Eddies Pages for Presbyterian Church RH; Barrow Submariners Association; Wickapaedia

**HELP REQUESTED**

Please send names of Ex RN/RM/WRNS who served in either of the world wars. Details also appreciated.

**CIRCULATION** - Please share 'Brave Report' with your former service colleagues - and we will post direct to them if they simply send an e-mail to: [houston.mckelvey@btinternet.com](mailto:houston.mckelvey@btinternet.com), placing Brave Report in the message bar, and give their name and former arm of service, and if they are members of the RNA or RBL, having knowledge of their branch would be appreciated. There are specific areas where we need information from!

**PUBLICATION NOTES**

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Brave Report is collated and published by The Very Rev. Dr Houston McKelvey, OBE QVRM TD.

Dr McKelvey served as chaplain for 29 years with 102/105 (Ulster & Scottish) Regiment, Royal Artillery TA; for 20 years as Chaplain to the RBL - Northern Ireland Area, and for a period as chaplain to the Belfast Branch of the Burma Star Association. He was involved in the life of HMS Caroline and HMS Hibernia. He was appointed an Honorary Chaplain to the RNR. He is a Past President of QUB Combined Services Club.