

## 1481 Lieutenant James William Spence Bias, RNR



James W.S. Bias was born at Eastabist, Birsay on 30<sup>th</sup> December 1883, the first child of farmer's son Thomas Bias and Jane Bias (née Spence). Thomas took over the farm of Flaws, but also worked as a fisherman. Jim joined his father on some of his fishing trips and that influenced him to join the Mercantile Marine after he finished his schooling, as the start of a long career at sea.

Jim worked his way through his tickets and eventually qualified as a Master Mariner. He sailed around Cape Horn aged 17 on the sailing ship *Loch Long*, carrying wool from Australia to the UK. On 29<sup>th</sup> May 1916 Jim joined the crew of the White Star Line steamship *Persic*, already working on trooping duties. Jim left it on 31<sup>st</sup> July to take up a commission in the Royal Naval Reserve. He was awarded the rank of Sub Lieutenant, with seniority dating from 8<sup>th</sup> August 1916. Jim reported for training in his new role to Chatham Dockyard, in the Thames estuary.

After brief service on the light cruiser HMS *Active*, on 6<sup>th</sup> November Jim joined the armed boarding steamer HMS *Fiona*. She carried out duties as part of the Northern Patrol, which was based in Kirkwall and from there patrolled to intercept German blockade runners and hunt U-boats in the waters between Iceland and Norway. When Jim joined the Northern Patrol the elderly RN Edgar Class cruisers had been replaced by requisitioned liners, steamers and trawlers to carry out the difficult, and at times dangerous, duties of enforcing the blockade on Germany.

In July 1917 Jim heard that his younger brother Victor had been killed, whilst he was serving as an Australian field artillery gunner in the opening bombardment of the Third Battle of Ypres, or Battle of Passchendaele. HMS *Fiona* was wrecked on the Pentland Skerries on 6<sup>th</sup> September, when Jim was officer of the watch. Jim spent nearly a month on a Repair and Laundry Ship, HMS *Assistance*, until on 2<sup>nd</sup> October he was tried by court martial for "Negligently or by default suffering HMS *Fiona* to be stranded and lost". Jim pleaded guilty and was adjudged to be severely reprimanded.

Jim trained at HMS *Excellent*, the gunnery school at Portsmouth, before on 7<sup>th</sup> November he joined the crew of the 3,870 ton armed boarding steamer HMS *Carron*, armed with two 4.7 inch guns. Jim worked hard on his duties on board and impressed his Captain. On 30<sup>th</sup> January 1918 his conduct report was recorded as "to my entire satisfaction", while that on 3<sup>rd</sup> August was "to my entire satisfaction. A painstaking and hardworking Officer".

Less than a week later Jim was promoted to Lieutenant, with seniority dating from 8<sup>th</sup> August 1918, and joined the Azalea Class Sweeping Sloop HMS *Clematis*. On 16<sup>th</sup> October Jim returned to HMS *Excellent* for another gunnery course, before travelled out to the RN Malta base ship HMS *Egmont*. Jim spent the last few weeks of the war serving in the Mediterranean and remained there until the following summer.

On 11<sup>th</sup> June 1919 Jim left Malta for passage to England. On 11<sup>th</sup> September Jim was granted leave to sit for his Extra Master's Certificate, until 6<sup>th</sup> December when he was demobilized from the Royal Navy. Jim had played a significant role in the naval blockade that was a critical factor in forcing Germany to seek an Armistice.

Jim returned to his merchant service career in Australia and married Agnes Russell. They had no children. Jim died in Australia in 1960.



Jim and his sister Jeannie