

SS 4751 Able Seaman Alfred Taylor



Alfred Taylor, son of Mr Chas. Taylor, Binscarth Cottage, Finstown, serving on H.M.S. Benbow.

Alfred Taylor was born at Millgoe, Firth on 21st May 1894, the third son of Charles Taylor and Elizabeth Taylor (née Brown). Charles was a farm servant working at Binscarth Farm. Elizabeth died of appendicitis on 1st May 1910.

Alfred enrolled into the Royal Navy as an Ordinary Seaman at Chatham on 10th February 1914. He had almost completed basic training there when war broke out. He joined a 25,000 ton new battleship, HMS *Benbow*, on 7th October and sailed with it to join the Grand Fleet three days later in its main base, Scapa Flow in Orkney.

Alfred was promoted Able Seaman on 10th February 1916. HMS *Benbow* remained with the Grand Fleet throughout the Great War and took part in the Battle of Jutland, but was not damaged.

Although the German High Seas Fleet made a couple more sorties to attack the Grand Fleet after Jutland, most Grand Fleet sailors then spent many boring months lying at anchor in Scapa Flow. Alfred was luckier than most sailors, because visiting his family in Finstown did not require long boat and train leave journeys, while he probably had some extra opportunities to see them.

Alfred was a volunteer in early February 1918 to a call for officers and other ranks to take part in "a secret and dangerous mission". The Grand Fleet easily found 200 volunteer sailors to join 740 Royal Marines of the 4th Battalion for that mission. On 1st March Alfred arrived back at Chatham, where the force for a raid to block Zeebrugge and Ostend Harbours was concentrating.

The sailors boarded on an old battleship, HMS *Hindustan*, while they spent a month training in close quarter fighting. That included using the bayonet, Mills bombs, Lewis light machine guns and Stokes mortars, also exercises, some at night, against locally based Territorial soldiers. Alfred was one of the 100 sailors assigned to the 5600 ton old cruiser, HMS *Vindictive*, the others boarded two Mersey ferries, *Daffodil* and *Iris*, and Royal Marines joined all three ships. They were to come alongside the mole at Zeebrugge and land storming parties, to distract the German defences while blockships sailed into the harbour and blocked the canal to Bruges.

After a cancellation on 12th April while the ships were approaching the Belgian coast, they pressed on towards Zeebrugge harbour on the night of the 22nd. *Vindictive* was 300 yards out when the wind blew away her smoke screen. Alert German gunners poured fire onto the ship and cut down almost half of the landing parties, sheltered behind improvised deck protection.

A battered *Vindictive* came alongside the Zeebrugge mole at 0001 hrs on the 23rd, St. George's Day. *Daffodil* pushed to hold her there for fifty minutes, while sailors and marines struggled ashore under heavy fire. Only about 200 made it onto the mole and none even reached the German gun batteries. However, the three blockships did sail into the harbour, covered by a smokescreen most of the way. *Thetis* was sunk before she could ram the lock gate, but *Intrepid* and *Iphignia* pressed on to ground in the Bruges channel and exploded charges to scuttle there.

Iris, *Daffodil* and *Vindictive* had by then sailed from the mole, having retrieved most of the surviving landing force, except a platoon that failed to recognise the withdrawal signal. The Ostend raid failed altogether, while the Zeebrugge raid only blocked the channel for a few days. However, they provided a major boost to British civilian morale, at a time when the B.E.F. was fighting desperately to stop the Germans reaching the Channel ports, and for its own survival.

British casualties at Zeebrugge were 161 killed, 411 wounded, 16 missing and 13 taken prisoner, from a total force of about 1,300. Alfred Taylor died of wounds, aged 23, on 24th April, one of 28 who did soon after the raid. He is buried, with many other raid casualties, in Gillingham (Woodlands) Cemetery. He is commemorated, with his eldest brother John, on the Firth Memorial. Their sister Helen unveiled the memorial, during its dedication on Sunday, 26th December 1921.