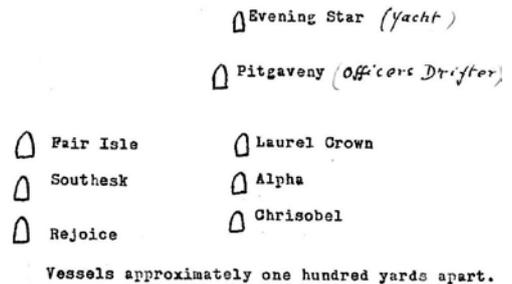


## 9569DA (Po) Second Hand Thomas Thomson, R.N.R.



Thomas Thomson was born at Quoybanks, North Ronaldsay on 9<sup>th</sup> March 1895. He was the son of Jemima Thomson, domestic servant, but was brought up by his grandparents, Thomas Thomson and Janet Thomson (née Tulloch). Thomas enrolled in the Royal Naval Reserve in Kirkwall on 5<sup>th</sup> November 1915. As a Deck Hand he joined the crew of the requisitioned 88-ton Inverness registered drifter *Pitgaveny*, working as a minesweeper with the Auxiliary Patrol out of Longhope. Minesweeping from a small drifter was a hazardous operation, as there was little prospect of survival for the sailors aboard if the boat or its sweep accidentally detonated a mine designed to sink a large ship.

On the morning of 22<sup>nd</sup> June 1916 *Pitgaveny* was the lead drifter of a flotilla of seven following close behind the yacht *Evening Star* through a 5 to 6 foot swell down the west side of Orkney to sweep an area there for mines – see the flotilla diagram shown here, which was drawn for the subsequent Court of Enquiry.



The boats had left Kirkwall bay in the early morning, travelling west through Eynehallow Sound, as a more direct route to their target area than eastabout and through the Pentland Firth. The flotilla passed through the sea area west of Marwick Head, where the crews knew that HMS *Hampshire* had struck a mine and sank with heavy loss of life on 5<sup>th</sup> June. Minesweepers from Scapa had swept thirteen more mines from the area and it was thought to be cleared, so the boats were not sweeping there on 22<sup>nd</sup> June.

At just after 8am the drifter *Laurel Crown* detonated a mine and the aft end disintegrated in a cloud of smoke and debris, while the forward section stayed afloat for less than ten seconds before sinking. Small boats were quickly launched from the yacht, also from the drifters *Pitgaveny* and *Fair Isle*. The boat from *Pitgaveny* picked up the only body found of the nine sailors killed on board *Laurel Crown*, that of Engineman Thomas Baker who is buried in Lyness Royal Naval Cemetery. The body of Burray sailor George Petrie, who had served only five weeks in the RNR, was not recovered. One of the boats from *Evening Star* found another mine. It was swept up by the yacht, towed inshore and sunk there by gunfire.

The “grim game” of cat-and-mouse between mine laying U-boats and Royal Navy minesweepers based in Orkney continued into 1917, when the number of boats deployed as minesweepers increased from 15 up to 25. When the drifter *Southesk* was sunk on 7<sup>th</sup> July in Auskerry Sound by a mine laid by UC-33 another Burray RNR sailor, 19 year-old James Copland, was among the four crewmen killed.

After three months training, including in gunnery, at Portsmouth, Thomas Thomson was promoted to Leading Deck Hand on 17<sup>th</sup> December 1917. On 7<sup>th</sup> January 1918 he joined the crew of the 198-ton Aberdeen trawler *Morven*, working as a minesweeper out of Lerwick. Thomas must have quickly impressed his new skipper, as he was promoted to Second Hand, or Mate, twelve days later.

The trawler *Morven* moved south, working out of Granton, Portsmouth and then Chatham. Thomas had returned north, probably on home leave, before he died of pneumonia (after 27 days’ illness) in the Balfour Hospital, Kirkwall on 10<sup>th</sup> June 1918, aged 23. Thomas was buried in the NW part of North Ronaldsay Churchyard, having survived nearly three years of hazardous service at sea on minesweepers, only to join the long list of service victims of the Spanish Flu pandemic.