

RMA/11527 Gunner Albert William Hancox



Albert William Hancox was born in Southwark, London on 28th March 1889, the second son of bricklayer Walter Hancox and Elizabeth Mary Hancox (née Riley). When Albert was just a few years old the family moved to live in Gloucester.

Albert had worked as a railway porter, when he joined the Royal Marine Artillery at Portsmouth on 11th September 1905, aged 16 and in search of adventure (got more than he bargained for!). Albert “adjusted” his date of birth on enlistment to 2nd February 1888, making his recorded age 17 years 7 months 9 days. That ensured he forfeited only 144 days of under-age service, until it thereafter counted towards his pension.

While Albert trained as an RMA gunner at Portsmouth, he gained a 3rd Class School Certificate on 19th

December 1905, his 2nd Class on 28th August 1906. Albert attained rank of 2nd Class Gunner on 24th April 1906, then Gunner on 14th August. His service record shows Albert was rated Very Good in both Character and Ability at the end of his training on 31st December 1906.

Albert’s first ship posting was to join the crew of the Majestic Class pre-dreadnought battleship HMS *Victorious* on 1st January 1907. She had paid off from the Atlantic Fleet at Devonport the day before and then re-commissioned to serve in the Nore Division of the Home Fleet. Albert returned to Eastney Barracks, Portsmouth in August 1908, when HMS *Victorious* started a refit.

Albert on 16th February 1909 joined the crew of the last Chatham built battleship, King Edward VII Class HMS *Africa*. She was armed with two twin-turret Mark X 12-inch, five single turret 9.2-inch and ten 6-inch guns, powered by coal but with oil sprayers. After nearly two years in the Home Fleet on HMS *Africa*, Albert left on 24th April 1911 shortly before she went into reserve.

On 6th June Albert joined another King Edward VII Class battleship, HMS *Commonwealth*, just out of refit. In May 1912 all seven King Edward VII Class battleships formed the 3rd Battle Squadron, which left the Home Fleet in November for the Mediterranean after the First Balkan War started. The squadron participated in a blockade by an international force of Montenegro and an occupation of Scutari, before the battleships re-joined the Home Fleet in June 1914.

Albert spent three weeks ashore and a week on HMS *Albion*, then joined the Majestic Class battleship HMS *Mars* on 26th July, the day before the Royal Navy mobilized for war. *Mars* and her sister ships *Hannibal*, *Magnificent* and *Victorious* formed the 9th Battle Squadron, based in the Humber where HMS *Mars* was serving as guard ship when war was declared on 4th August. HMS *Mars* transferred to the Dover Patrol on 9th December, based at Portland. In February 1915 HMS *Mars* was paid off to be disarmed in Belfast, so Albert left her and returned to Portsmouth.

Albert was not posted to join another battleship. After another seven months of service at Portsmouth, he joined the considerable number of Royal Marine gunners sent to join local Territorial Force volunteers of the Orkney Royal Garrison Artillery manning gun positions to guard the new main base of the Grand Fleet in Scapa Flow. Albert arrived in Orkney, officially posted to HMS *Cyclops II*, *Scapa*, on 1st October 1915. He joined the marines and territorials manning the Hoy Batteries on the outskirts of Stromness, to protect the North-West Scapa Flow entrance of Hoy Sound, at the site now known as Ness Battery.



Eva Garson Hancox (née Brass)

When Albert arrived in Orkney more than a year into the war, the early improvised coast gun positions were taking shape into formal defences. The twelve pounder guns hastily landed from ships and sited west of Stromness had been moved to Clestrain, replaced at Ness by seven new 5-inch and 6-inch guns manufactured by the Bethlehem Steel Company of Pennsylvania. Accommodation at the Hoy Batteries had improved, by building wooden huts on concrete foundations.

The arrival of Royal Marine gunners was necessary to man guns in a total of 13 Orkney Great War coast batteries, as there were not enough Orcadian Territorials to man them all. The two groups of gunners got on well together, but as the war progressed Admiral Jellicoe insisted that the Royal Marines must provide all of the officers (so six Orcadians were given temporary RMA commissions) and most of the gunners.

During 1917 the British Army pressed for the transfer of experienced Orkney Territorial gunners into heavy gun batteries abroad and most left to serve there. The mostly Royal Marine gunners left behind in the Scapa Flow batteries were not tested by any surface attacks by German ships, so their main enemies became boredom and the weather, especially the wind in all seasons of the year. Albert was lucky to be stationed at Ness, with fairly easy access to the facilities and locals in the town of Stromness, rather than one of the remote batteries on South Ronaldsay or Flotta.

On 25th September 1918 Albert married Eva Garson Brass in Stromness, giving his address then as Graemsay. Albert left Orkney on 6th March 1919 to return to Eastney Barracks in Portsmouth, where he was discharged on 9th April having served thirteen years in the Royal Marine Artillery. Albert's discharge certificate records his character as Very Good, that he had been awarded three Good Conduct Badges, his intended residence was Dundas Street, Stromness, also the payment to him of £2-18s-4d on 1st April 1921 from the Naval Prize Fund. For his Great War service, Albert was awarded the 1914-15 Star, War and Victory Medals in August 1922. Albert's service record shows he was transferred to the Royal Fleet Reserve on 10th April 1919 and was awarded a Long Service & Good Conduct Medal in October 1927.

Albert and Eva stayed in Stromness after the war and had five children, three girls and two boys. On 1st April 1920 Albert got a job as a cook on the lighthouse boat Pole Star. However, he was discharged (with a good reference and record) on 5th August 1927, because of health problems from a duodenal ulcer.

Albert struggled to find regular work in Orkney during the 1930s, not helped by him being a "ferry-louper". He joined the Territorial Army in Stromness on 3rd November 1938 for four years, when it was recruiting for another war that then looked inevitable. Albert was given the service number 1455269 and gave his trade on enlistment as a painter. When war did come, Albert was embodied on 1st September 1939 and served in 198 Heavy Battery RA at Stanger Head on Flotta.



Pole Star crew, Albert standing far left

The continual stress of war service caused Albert's ulcer to "flare up" and he was discharged as a Bombardier on 31st August 1940 for "Ceasing to fulfil Army Physical Requirements Para 383 (XVI) KR 1935". His discharge certificate rated his military conduct as Very Good and his testimonial stated "this N.C.O. held a very good character during his period of colour service".