

GENEALOGISTS' MAGAZINE

Journal of the Society of Genealogists



Volume 32 Number 11 Sep 2018

ERNIE'S WAR

MARINE PRIVATE ERNEST MAGGS AT THE BATTLE OF JUTLAND

Peter Maggs

On 11 September 1914, one day before his 22nd birthday and barely a month after Britain had declared war on Germany, my grandfather, Ernie Maggs, signed up with the Royal Marines Light Infantry at Gosport and was sent to the marines barracks at Deal for training. He had received leave of absence from his employer, and wanted to 'do his bit'.

There was no obvious naval or marine tradition in the family, but Ernie had been living with his mother, father and sister at Stanley Street in Weymouth, barely a mile from Portland Harbour. The harbour, sometime base of the Home Fleet, saw frequent comings and goings of Royal Navy ships, the more significant of which would be accompanied by multi-gun salutes. There was a naval base at Portland, just a few miles away, and Weymouth must have had strong naval contacts as a result. In 1914, the Grand Fleet was assembled at Portland, and on Churchill's orders sailed to Scapa Flow at the beginning of August. It must have been a magnificent sight, one that Ernie quite possibly witnessed; perhaps it convinced him that he wanted to serve his country aboard ship.

Ernie's father, Frank Maggs, was born on Salisbury Plain, the son of a shepherd, and went to London to seek his fortune. He met Ernie's mother in Merton in South London, and they eventually went to Weymouth where Frank found employment as a foreman working on the roads. Evidently, he wanted to protect his son from an outdoor life at all times of the year, so Ernie was encouraged to get a job in a shop. Family tradition has it that he had two job offers, both from expanding chains of stores with prospects for personal advancement: W H Smith & Sons, and The Maypole Dairy.



W H Smith started in the eighteenth century, and the company took off in the 1850s selling newspapers and magazines from newsstands in railway stations; it was a major company by the 1900s. The Maypole Dairy dated from the mid-19th century; it was an archetypal 'Pile 'em High and Sell 'em Cheap' chain. The Maypole sold tea, margarine - which it made at its factory in Southall, West London - and butter at very competitive prices; margarine and tea were two of the staples for poorer families. Both openings had prospects; there would always be a market for newspapers, as there would be for tea, margarine and butter. Perhaps Ernie was attracted by the idea of a proper shop rather than a newsstand in a draughty railway station, because he opted for The Maypole Dairy, and joined them on 12 November 1907 when he was fifteen years old.

Following the outbreak of war, The Maypole, in common with many employers, granted Ernie indefinite leave to join the armed forces, and he went from being a sales assistant exchanging polite conversation with lady customers, patting margarine and butter into saleable portions and wrapping up tea, to duties in His Majesty's Marines. Eleven months later after a period of training, he joined *HMS Canada* as a marine private.

HMS Canada was a super-dreadnought, a brand new state-of-the-art battleship built originally for Chile as *Almirante Latorre* and launched in 1913.¹ On the outbreak of war she was purchased by the British Government, renamed, and modified for use by the Royal Navy. The first of this new and revolutionary type of craft was *HMS Dreadnought* launched in 1906. She was longer, heavier, faster and had more than twice

the firepower of anything previously built. *HMS Canada* was even more formidable. She carried ten 14 inch guns, and could deliver more than twice the broadside weight even of a *Dreadnought*. She was also heavier and faster still, achieving up to 24 knots - 26 mph - in service. *HMS Canada* was said to be the largest ship in the Grand Fleet at Jutland.



Ernie Maggs (seated) with two comrades. On the back of the photograph is written: 'Sincerely yours, Ern, HMS Canada 1916'.

There were around 140 marines on board the *Canada*, and their main function in battle was to man the turrets containing the 14 inch guns, the ship's principal offensive weapon. Each gun could fire a 1,600 lb shell 13 or 14 miles; their extreme range was limited only by visibility. The explosive charge was supplied by four silk bags of cordite, a mixture of mainly gun-cotton and nitro glycerine, each weighing in the region of 100 lb.

It was the function of the gun crew to manoeuvre the shells and cordite bags using trolleys and hoists from the magazine in the bowels of the ship (well below the waterline) into the gunhouse, load the gun via the breech - shell first then four bags of cordite - and set the bearing and elevation according to instructions from the officer in charge of fire control. The work must have been back-breaking and relentless, particularly in battle when time was of the essence.

Much has been written about the Battle of Jutland; the conduct of the commanders of the Grand Fleet, Jellicoe and Beatty, remains controversial to this day. What is undeniable though, is that it was a strategic success for the British, albeit at a terrible price. Following the battle, the German High Seas Fleet (*Hochseeflotte*) was effectively contained in port for the duration of the war, and Germany had to resort to submarine warfare and indiscriminate attacks on merchant vessels. The result of this was that the USA was brought into the war in 1917. The Royal Navy certainly should have won at Jutland; there were 155 British ships against 99 German ones, and in terms of battleships and battlecruisers, the British outnumbered the Germans by nearly two to one. But the Royal Navy lost over 6,000 dead, more than twice the German losses, and twice the tonnage of ships. Jellicoe has been criticised for failing to press his advantage due to a combination of caution and poor communications, and both Jellicoe and Beatty were victim to the Royal Navy's own stifling traditions; as Jellicoe's grandson has observed, subordinates were instructed to:

'speak only when spoken to, do something only when ordered...'²

When the Grand Fleet sailed from Scapa Flow, the seaplane carrier *Campania* did not receive the order to sail and was left behind. No one on board seemed to notice and she was apparently not missed by the fleet:

'This was the first of many signalling failures that were to plague the British over the next two days as well as being an example of the lack of initiative that pervaded the Royal Navy at that time.'³

As a marine private, or more properly 'a marine', at the bottom of the command structure, Ernie Maggs' opportunities for showing initiative were limited, although he was well-regarded by his superiors. His military record shows that his character was always noted as 'very good' and his ability was 'super'. He might have thought that a posting on the largest battleship in the fleet was a moderately safe option, but a large ship makes a large target, and Ernie joined the gunnery team in 'Q' Turret which was amidships - the aiming point of any hostile fire...

On 30 May 1916, following radio intercepts indicating that the German fleet was on the move, the order was given to sail and *HMS Canada* left Scapa Flow in company with squadrons of the British Grand Fleet under the command of Admiral John Jellicoe; she was in the third division of the fourth battle squadron 'which was led by Jellicoe personally'. The ship was commanded by Captain William Nicholson. Other squadrons left the Moray Firth, meeting up with Jellicoe's group halfway between Scotland and Norway, and a third group, under the command of Vice-Admiral Beatty left Rosyth, sailing due east towards Jutland. The German High Seas Fleet under the command of Vice-Admirals Hipper and Scheer sailed north out of the Jade bight. First contact was between Beatty and Hipper at 3:31 pm on 31 May; both sides opened fire twenty minutes later.

Ernie Maggs decided to write an account of events as he experienced them, and covered slightly more than two sides of foolscap with notes. His account starts:

'*HMS Canada* May 31st 1916, Q Turret (14") Gunhouse ... 3:30 pm order from J.J. [John Jellicoe] that our battlecruisers [have] sighted the enemy and were preparing for action. 4.05 pm, battlecruisers engaging the enemy. Full speed by the Grand Fleet to reinforce them doing ourselves just over 20 kn. Told we were going into action (cheers etc).'

However, if the crew were going into action, it was important that they should be fed first:

'4:45 pm, went to tea (1/4 hour allowed) (tea, bread butter and jam). 5 pm closed up in Q turret.'

The group was steaming south-east in search of both Beatty and the enemy. Then:

'Heavy firing was heard on the starboard bow and was made out to be our battle cruisers led by the *Lion* and supported by light cruisers and small craft. Report from J.J. 5th B[attle] S[quadron] engaging enemy on the starboard beam.'

But the visibility was poor as Ernie noted:

'The weather was inclined to be misty where the enemy were...'

Beatty and Hipper were over eight miles apart when they engaged. The ships had lookout platforms around 120 feet above sea level, giving a horizon distance of 14 miles, and since their masts etc. were at least 120 feet high, they were visible much further than the horizon. But under misty conditions, visibility was substantially reduced, made even more difficult in battle by smoke from the guns and splashes from incoming shells. However:

'Could distinctly see the *Tiger* and other battle cruisers firing, also a four funnelled cruiser probably the *Warrior* or *Defence*.'

And now things started to get close and personal:

'6:25 pm, at this moment action was developing, a small calibre shell was observed by myself ... to explode in the air about 100 yards from Q Turret [and] a salvo from the enemy observed to fall short from our starboard bow.'

HMS Canada started to hit back:

'6:30 pm, *Canada* led by *Iron Duke*, *Benbow* and squadron went into action; fired two salvos of 14"; some very good shooting from the different salvos ... as far as could be made out, the enemy ships were of the *Kaiser* and *Pommern* class one of which caught on fire; two ships were sunk in that action, firing at a range of 12,500 yards; cease firing at 6:55 pm was sounded.'

Then after a change of course to due south:

‘Second action commenced 7:05 pm; *Canada*, *Iron Duke*, *Benbow* and squadron engage eight German battleships and cruisers. *Royal Oak* does some fine shooting with the *Canada*; a line of destroyers trying to cover retreat of their larger class and constantly trying to torpedo our line. One torpedo seen to miss us, another one struck the *Marlborough* astern but did not sink her, she still steamed 17 knots alright. At this moment a full salvo of 6", 13.5", 14", and 15" shells at almost point blank range of about 10,000 or 11,000 yards from *Royal Oak*, *Canada*, *Benbow* and may have been others, full on the whole line of destroyers.⁴ The foremost one absolutely leaped up in the air and sank immediately, the others were covered in smoke for the time but when it cleared away no destroyers were to be seen. About six to eight were in that line, it is hardly possible for them to have got away, as there were about five small light cruisers waiting for them.’

There were 250 ships involved in the battle, and identification of the enemy must have been an issue:

‘German destroyers distinguished by flag and longer aftermast, [with] a long kind of pennant flying from aftermast.’

And now visibility was really poor:

‘The weather by now was getting very misty and darkness was coming on (twilight in fact).’

Ernie noted some of the things he had seen during the action:

‘... the *Indefatigable* was passed broken in half with bows battered rather badly, evidently an explosion amidships; also a destroyer of unknown class floating upside down. Two of our destroyers passed us out of control, one on fire, which was got under control before we had gone far.’

As far as *HMS Canada* was concerned, the action was now all but over:

Cease firing at about 8 o'clock for us. Ordered to load, stand by [and] follow Evershed [an electro-

mechanical bearing indicator] at 8:30 pm but nothing followed. Rumours of *Shannon* blown up - probably was either the *Defence* or *Black Prince* gone under. [*Shannon* survived; both *Defence* and *Black Prince* were sunk]. 9 pm supper, action rations served out - bully beef, ships biscuit and cocoa went down a treat.

Visibility continued to deteriorate even further:

‘Very misty on the horizon now. Could hardly see much; kept on the cruise ... did not fire but could hear firing going on heavily in the starboard quarter. A night attack was made by the enemy at about 10:15 pm till midnight, and firing was very heavy on both sides. A large ship was observed to sink in a mass of flame and smoke which lighted up the sky all round.’

Ernie's night defence station was to man one of the searchlights:

‘I was up at the searchlight, my night defence station, from 12 till 2 am. On returning to Q turret at 2 am, word was passed from J.J. that the fifth battle squadron was engaging the enemy on the starboard quarter. We stood by for immediate action but nothing came of it.’

And then a threat from above:

‘3:30 am, a zeppelin appeared over the fleet [and] firing was at once opened on it. The *Benbow* fired her foremost turret of 13.5" shrapnel at it; range was 20,800 yards for us we did not fire; as soon as she came in range she turned about and made off at once (our [anti] aircraft gun was at the ready and manned.)’

But that was the end of the action:

‘We steamed up and down all that day ready for any emergency ... night passed calmly. The next day we arrived at Scapa our base at about 12 o'clock, dropped anchor [and] coaled ship as soon as we got here; took 1,100 tons in about 4 to 5 hours also ammunition, 45 x 14" [and] 93 x 6" [shells] which I believe was the amount we fired altogether.’

HMS Canada had returned to Scapa Flow, but on the way:



Ernie, second from left, opens a Maypole Dairy in Brentford High Street, 1 February 1921. The long tassels on his apron and the white jacket indicate that he was the manager. The photographer's tripod can be seen reflected in the 'Maypole' name above the shop between the 'Y' and the 'P'.

'... just before entering Pentland Firth the casualties (dead) who fell in action on the *Barham* and *Malaya* were committed to the deep. The still was sounded and all men on deck stood at attention; the ensign was flown at half mast.'

On 14 June the fleet received a very special visitor:

'Arrived Wednesday, HM the King visits the Grand Fleet; steams up and down the lines in a destroyer with two escorts.⁵ We all man ship...'

It was a suitable morale-booster for the crews of the Grand Fleet who had lost over 6,000 of their comrades in the greatest and bloodiest sea battle ever.

Ernie saw no more action in *HMS Canada*, and in May 1917 he was admitted to Haslar Hospital, Portsmouth, suffering from *Morbus Cordis Organicus*, or heart disease. He was invalided out of the marines a short while later, and re-joined the Maypole Dairy. His time in the

marines did him no harm in terms of career structure, because on 1 February 1921 he opened a new Maypole Dairy on Brentford High street as shop manager.⁶ Ernie and his wife Gwendoline were able to enjoy a decent standard of living on a shop manager's wages - and the Maypole believed in profit sharing; as manager, he received an annual bonus in the region of £90, a considerable amount of money for the time.

Ernie Maggs opened several new Maypole Dairy shops in the following years, but in 1934 during the depths of the Depression, he became a casualty of low-cost New Zealand butter imports eroding the Maypole's margins. He was dismissed with a week's wages. Somehow the family survived because ever a frugal man, Ernie had put money aside for a 'rainy day'. Sadly though, he died at the relatively young age of 54 of a coronary thrombosis. My grandmother insisted that his condition was exacerbated by his 1917 illness, which she was certain had been brought about by cold and damp conditions on board ship. Nevertheless, Ernie's first-hand

account of his experiences at the Battle of Jutland stands in the historical canon of that conflict, and contributes in a modest way to our knowledge of that momentous encounter.

Notes

1. *Jane's Fighting ships of World War I*, Studio Editions, London, 1990.
2. Nick Jellicoe, Admiral John Jellicoe's grandson, narrating a 24 minute video on the battle, www.jutland1916.com.
3. Voices from the past, *The Battle of Jutland*, Richard Osborne, Frontline Books, 2016.

4. It is notable that 100 years after Nelson, and with immeasurably more powerful ships, the main strategy in battle was still to steam in a line (hence 'ship of the line'), abreast with the enemy, and fire at each other.
5. One of the gun-turret officers on board *HMS Collingwood*, mentioned in despatches for his behaviour at Jutland, was a certain Albert Windsor, the king's son, and future King George VI.
6. There were in the region of 900 Maypole Dairy shops in the country at the time.

Peter Maggs

Email: pnd.maggs@gmail.com

William Chitty 1838-1904 = Emma Simpson 1842-1887 of Bexley Heath, Kent

Said to have 22 children. 19 known.

Rosina Alice 1858-1938 = George Castleton

Sarah Martha 1860-1926 = John Weston

Maria Hannah 1863-1864 d. young

Elizabeth Ann 1865-1934 = William Backett

Alice b.1866 = William Henry Marchant

William James 1868-1915 = Alice Maria Weatherall

Charles 1871-1959 = Catherine Blackman

Arthur 1873-1904 single

Caroline Louisa 1874-1875 d. young

Emma = 1. John Samuel Bishop 2. Frank Cooper

Richard 1877-1878 d. young

Mary Ann Eliza 1879-1964 = Charles David Harry Knapps

(triplet) b/d.1879 d. young

(triplet) b/d.1879 d. young

Ada 1881-1963 = Henry Owen

Frederick = Elizabeth Franklin

James Albert d.1915 single

Jane Louisa 1886-1887 d. young

last child b/d.1887 d. young

When Sarah Simpson died in April 1903 her obituary said that she had 22 children and one of her daughters had 24 children. Her granddaughter is said to have had 19 children (in the 1911 census she said 17).

The obituary said that Sarah had 164 descendants and her daughter had 59. These figures seem suspiciously exact and I have always suspected the

two sons of 'having a larf' at the journalist's expense. Sarah was 81 - not 97 - and is recorded correctly in the cemetery register and on the memorial cards. However I can document 19 children for Mrs Chitty and with a three year gap early on.

Can anyone beat the record of 19 children from the same father and mother?