

Vidlin in the Great War

1914 - 1918

(Slide 1) On 28 June 1914, just about 100 years ago, Gavrillo Princip assassinated Archduke Franz Ferdinand and set in motion the events which would culminate in the First World War – or as it was known then, The Great War. No other conflict has claimed as many lives from Vidlin as The Great War. I think it is appropriate at this time that we should remember – or in my case learn – what those men were doing, why they were doing it and how their efforts impacted on the wider conduct of the war. Pictures of the men have been provided by The Lunnasting History Group.

The following does not cover the causes of the war or its conclusion; neither does it address the conflict's major controversies except where they impact upon the stories of the men from Vidlin. It does not provide a general narrative of the war, nor does it glorify or denigrate those who fought. It seeks merely to highlight the actions of those who saw where they believed their duty lay and so went off to do it.

(Slide 2) There are ten names on the Vidlin war memorial. Of those ten, five died of natural causes. This may, at first sight seem odd; one does not think of natural causes as a major wartime killer. But, disease is the normal cause of death for most of us, so it should not be so surprising that this normal aspect of life continues during the most abnormal times. Indeed the conduct of military operations improves the opportunity for natural causes to kill. It concentrates people, whether in ships, headquarters, or in the army in the field. Sanitation and hygiene are often rudimentary and the facilities often overloaded by use. Close proximity of food and drink to faeces and urine is unhealthy.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that The Great War was the first conflict in history where disease killed fewer than weapons.

(Slide 3) There were a number of key advances in medicine and weapons technology which changed this ratio¹. The great Victorian clean-up of major cities impacted on military medicine. The importance of sanitation and hygiene were enhanced. The pioneering work of Louis Pasteur linked disease to bacteria. As a result new techniques of wound treatment (including blood transfusions), antisepsis and antiseptics became available to doctors. There were major advances in reconstructive surgery. During the war, doctors began to understand what is called today – Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD); what was known then as Shell Shock or Combat Fatigue, though it was initially considered in some cases to be merely malingering or cowardice². At the same time machine guns, poison gas, quick-firing artillery and bolt-action rifles made the battlefield a far more deadly environment than hitherto.

(Slide 4) George L Morrison, Seaman RNR 408/L died 23 Nov 1916, of meningitis.

(Slide 5) Robert Sutherland, Seaman, RNR (Shetland Section), L 1337, Lunning died at HMS Excellent, 8 March 1917, illness unspecified. (Slide 6) Alexander J Cooper,

Deck Hand, RNR, DA 13509, Greenroads Vidlin died 19 May 1918, at HMS Leader illness unspecified. (Slide 7) Thomas Thompson (as listed on the War Memorial), of

Orgill Lunnasting, a wireless operator RNVR z/7920 died of pleurisy on 5 Dec 1916 at Royal Naval Depot Crystal Palace. (Slide 8)³ .The official, digitised records list him

as Thomson. This could be a transcription error from the original handwritten records but he is also recorded on another casualty website as Thomson^{3a}. He may have

been known as Thomason locally. The Cabin Museum has a picture, which claims to be of him, in a Seaforth Highlander uniform. At first sight, this is most odd – you are

either Navy or Army. But he seems to have been assigned into the Royal Naval Division, a unit manned by RN Reservists not required for service at sea, which

instead fought on with the Army on the Western Front and elsewhere. (Slide 9)

Robert Jack Georgeson served aboard RN Light Cruisers HMS Brilliant and Attentive⁴. He was invalided to Portland Naval Hospital on 9 Mar 1917 and awarded

a disability pension. He died of pulmonary tuberculosis on 14 Sept 1919 – after the end of the war but was recorded as a war death. This would imply an unusual level

of sensitivity amongst officials to local circumstance – not something with which officialdom is normally associated.

Of the five who died in combat, two were soldiers and three sailors. I will cover first the soldiers.

(Slide 10) Alexander Laurenson, Lunning Vidlin, served with 8/10th Battalion Gordon Highlanders (8/10 GH) and died on 9 April 1917. This makes absolutely no sense at first sight. Let me explain why.

(Slide 11) Traditionally, Britain has relied on the Royal Navy to ensure its territorial integrity. Parliament has feared an over-mighty central government backed by a coercive standing army. Therefore, Parliament was always happy to vote funds for the Navy but did all it could to ensure the Army was small and with sizeable detachments deployed overseas – mostly India.

(Slide 12) The British Army in 1914⁵ comprised a professional Regular Army of just under 250,000 soldiers – too small by the European standards set by France, Germany, Austria-Hungary and Russia, but highly trained and skilled – having learned painful lessons on the effectiveness of modern bolt-action rifles during the Boer War. Pre-war plans anticipated (but, arguably, not in the detail necessary) that the force would have to be expanded by volunteers and conscripts if it was to influence a European-wide conflict.

By the war's end⁶ a total of 5.7 million men had been mobilised - 21% of the male population of UK. Infantry formed the bulk of the Army and Infantry regiments constituted regional depots, where recruits could be gathered and formed into

combat units – battalions. Shetland's regional Infantry Regiment is The Gordon Highlanders.

Pre-1914, there were two battalions of The Gordon Highlanders; by 1918, 21 battalions had been formed⁷. Now that would result in unit designations of 1 – 21 GH. However, due to losses in 1916, the 8th and 10th battalions of the Gordon Highlanders were amalgamated – hence Pte Laurenson's unusual appointment to 8/10th battalion.

(Slide 13) By April 1917, the fourth year of the war, French and German armies in the west had been exhausted by two years of stalemate and monumental casualties. Russian defeats at the hands of the Germans led to a February 1917 revolution; the abdication of the Tsar in March; the formation of provisional government and return of Lenin to Russia via a sealed train.

Britain and France were genuinely fearful that the Russians would conclude a separate peace with the Central Powers.

However, Germany itself was suffering from the effects of an Allied naval blockade across the North Sea, Channel and Mediterranean Sea. Unable to break it through use of its battle fleet, it attempted instead to impose its own blockade through unrestricted submarine warfare in February 1917. Relations with the USA had deteriorated as the Americans leaned further towards Great Britain. Unrestricted submarine warfare and the revelations of the Zimmerman telegram (an invitation to the Mexican government to join the Central Powers and attempt to invade the US, which the Mexicans declined) finally tipped the US into declaring war on the Central Powers in 1917.

However, it was clear that it would take the US at least 2 years to form and train units for combat in Western Europe.

April 1917 saw Britain and France, for the first time attempt to co-ordinate their individual offensives⁸

(Slide 14) 8/10 GH was part of 44th Brigade of 15 Lowland Division, VI Corps (General Haldane), Third Army – commanded by General Allenby (who would later command the Egyptian Expeditionary Force, which captured Jerusalem from the Ottomans)⁹. **(Slide 15)** The Corps objective was through its own attack, to tie down German forces just south of Arras, whilst the Canadian Corps seized the main objective of Vimy Ridge. The attack was scheduled for 9 April. **(Slide 16)** 8/10 GH's objective¹⁰ was to seize the German trenches, then move on to a fortified position known as the Railway Triangle and then take the Wancourt-Feucy line of trenches. **(Slide 17)** The attack plan called for the infantry to follow-in a creeping artillery barrage.

This plan requires the artillery to begin firing on the enemy front-line trenches and suppress the defenders whilst the attacking infantry advance towards the exploding

shells. At a pre-arranged moment, the barrage creeps forward and the attacking infantry storm the trench before the defenders realise the fire has shifted. All this requires sticking rigidly to the plan and synchronising your watches. Get too close and you're killed by your own shells; stay too far back and what enemy are left have time to cut you down in No Man's Land after the barrage has crept forwards.

(Slide 18) The following narrative has been condensed from 8/10 GH's Unit Diary (provided by The Gordon Highlanders' Museum). On 2 Apr at 14.00hrs operational orders were issued to 8/10th; at 19.00hrs the battalion moved into cellars in Arras. On 4 April – preliminary bombardment began at 6.00am.

On 7 Apr at 18.00hrs orders were received to raid the trenches opposite 8/10th GH front – D Company (Coy) was selected for the raid. This plus the bombardment risked warning the Germans that an attack was imminent.

However, the raid found that the wire had not been cut by the bombardment, a key objective missed. The Coy was out in No Man's Land for 25 mins; no prisoners (a key objective of the raid) were taken and only one actually NCO reached the enemy trenches. The Company suffered 1 dead 8 wounded. However as a result of this raid, heavy trench mortars deployed forward to cut the wire, now known to be especially thick.

8 Apr 1400hrs bombardment intensified – German artillery responded but their effectiveness was diminished by British counter-battery fire.

9 Apr 0230hrs battalion moved into assembly trenches for the attack and reported as in position at 0430hrs -1 Zero Hour. A&B Coys led the attack, D in support, C in reserve – 20 Officers 702 ORs in total. 0530hrs main barrage opened – D and C Coys moved up. 0532 A&B Coys moved out just behind the barrage – officers needed to stop the men following too closely to it. A German SOS signal was detected and artillery fire fell on British front line and communication trenches – with some casualties to C Coy. At 0534hrs artillery fire shifted to German support trenches; A&B Coys stormed forward and captured the German front line trenches and objectives 500m beyond there – known locally as Observation Ridge. Bn HQ was immediately informed of this success and was moved up to the German front line; they remained there for the rest of the day. The attack plan was working.

A&B Coys halted for 1 hr 40 mins to re-organise. 0700hrs 8/10 GH advanced on its second objective – The Railway Triangle - A&B Coys led again. At 0750hrs – the attack was held up by heavy machine gun fire and a redoubt on the unit's right. Capt John Martin MC OC A Coy and 2Lt AC Hay organised two parties to assault the redoubt. They were assisted by a tank, providing local fire support and successfully cleared the redoubt and the Railway Triangle. However both officers killed – statistically this looks most likely where Pte Laurenson was killed, though one cannot be sure. By 1210hrs the Battalion was halted to re-organise. Battalion had advanced

2000m – a considerable distance for trench warfare. 46th Bde then moved through 44th Bde to attack the third objective – the Wancourt-Feuchy line.

8/10 GH's casualties during 9-12 April comprised 4 officers killed, 4 wounded; 47 ORs killed 162 wounded; a further 36 were listed as missing.

The Canadians took Vimy Ridge.

Professor Gary Sheffield called 9 April 1917 “the most successful day since the beginning of trench warfare”¹¹. However, it proved a singularly unsuccessful day for Pte Laurenson and his family.

(Slide 19) (Slide 20) Pte James Pearson 3rd Battalion Machine Gun Corps from North House Sweening died on 28 March 1918.

(Slide 21) The Machine Gun Corps was a peculiar creation of The Great War – a reaction to the tactical domination of the WW1 battlefield by the machine-gun¹². It originally comprised smaller Company units; however those Companies were amalgamated and 3 Battalion Machine Gun Corps was formed in March 1918. The Corps itself was disbanded in 1922 when the machine-gun's dominance diminished as technology changed again. 3 Bn MGC was a small unit – ideally 14-16 guns per company, with 4 companies in the battalion. It was a Division-level asset. Machine guns were hugely influential in the conduct of The Great War; almost all offensives stalled, bogged down and/or suffered disproportionate casualties due to well-sited, stocked and prepared machine guns. The Machine Gun Corps was nicknamed “The Suicide Club” due to heavy casualties amongst its personnel¹³.

(Slide 22) It is worth noting in the context of Pte Pearson's narrative, that the unit was equipped with the Vickers Mk1 machine gun, that he was part of a crew of 6 for each gun. The gun itself weighed 14kg; the tripod 10kg, water to cool the barrel 5kg. It was fed by 250-round belted ammunition, which it could consume roughly every 30 seconds at a maximum rate of fire of 450 rounds per minute. A barrel lasted 10,000 rounds. This was a remarkably rugged, reliable, enduring piece of equipment (still in service 50 years later) whose effectiveness was determined primarily by the availability of ammunition and barrels. It was most effectively employed on the defensive – due to its relative immobility and rapid consumption of supplies – because rounds and barrels could be stockpiled in well-prepared positions with commanding views and interlocking fields of fire¹⁴.

(Slide 23) By March 1918, Russia was out of the war – but 1 million German troops were still needed to control huge areas of former Russian territory¹⁵. Nevertheless, some 48 divisions were sent west bringing German forces up to 191 divisions against 178 British and French equivalents. The March 1918 offensive represented Germany's last chance to win the war before the USA entered decisively on the Allied side and both sides knew it. The Germans introduced a number of significant tactical innovations in an attempt to improve their chances of success.

The best of those still serving in the Germany Army were concentrated into some 74 special Assault and Mobile Divisions. Within those Divisions were formed elite Stormtrooper units. With enhanced firepower, these units were designed to fragment the enemy line and drive deep into its rear formations, by-passing isolated points of resistance, which follow-on forces were meant to mop-up. The Stormtroopers were meant to sustain the momentum of the offensive, which had always withered rapidly on previous occasions.

Artillery tactics were also tweaked¹⁶. In the past, prior to major offensives, guns had fired pre-bombardment calibration rounds to ensure that, on the day, they hit their designated targets. This however, provided ample warning for the defenders. As a result, guns were re-located to the range to conduct calibration shooting, thus depriving the enemy of that early-warning. Furthermore, guns in unprecedented numbers were concentrated and orchestrated to switch amongst a variety of targets as the offensive unfolded. They were tasked particularly with smashing telephone communication from front-line to rear HQs as well as enemy wire. Gas shells and high explosive were also mixed to suppress enemy counter-battery fire. The German initial offensive on 20 March against Sir Hubert Gough's Fifth Army was hugely successful¹⁷. By 28 March, German eyes had turned to the area around Arras, where 3 Bn MGC were dug in.

(Slide 24) Twenty-nine German divisions were eventually assembled on a 33-mile front from the Somme to Arleux (4 miles NW of Cambrai) for a general attack on British Third Army positions; but with Arras as the principal objective, the major breakthrough assault was planned against British forces defending the city on a 10-mile front between Authuille and Oppy¹⁸.

The following comes from 3 Bn MGC's Unit Diary (available as a digital download from The National Archive).

Pre 28 Mar – unit was subject to regular artillery bombardment. Germans were expected to attack in this sector from around 12 Mar onwards. The British correctly anticipated use of HE and gas rounds (Mustard). Extra gloves and socks where available were issued to troops to protect hands, scarves to cover necks plus respirators for faces. Chloride of lime was scattered in depressions and trenches to counteract Mustard gas effects.

On 28 Mar 0430hrs very heavy German artillery barrage inflicted heavy casualties; MGs responded with slow rate of fire intended to harass enemy. The Germans move forward at first light in waves breaking into small groups skilfully making best use of cover and dead ground. Front defensive line disintegrated into pockets of resistance surrounded by German attackers. Defenders held out to last man in places; elsewhere MGs ordered to remain in place whilst the infantry retreated (MGs were usually lost). The German plan was working.

Lt Blower was in command of "H" battery (which included Pte Pearson) on Div left front – he should have had 8 guns, in fact he had four. 2 of his 4 guns were lost in the initial artillery barrage and all four gun commanders became casualties – a tough day had just got a lot worse. The remaining 2 guns covered the infantry retreat. Blower then faced a difficult decision – withdraw whilst in contact – usually with catastrophic results - or just stand and fight till the ammunition ran out. He chose the former and somehow successfully withdrew the unit to the support line where one gun was damaged. Lt Blower then took his last gun and joined the remnants of another battery. Words cannot really adequately describe what a desperate and difficult task Blower's unit successfully performed. It is most likely that some time during this action, Pte Pearson died.

Overall on 28 Mar, 3 Bn MGC suffered Officers 1 killed, 9 wounded, 8 missing (assumed dead or captured) ORs 35 killed, 46 wounded, 60 missing. However, the Germans made only small gains in territory and at very heavy loss.

Pte Pearson's father received a letter from Lt Blower (reprinted courtesy of the Lunnasting History Group), which is reprinted in full below.

Dear Mr Pearson,

I am writing to express my deepest sympathy with you in the recent severe loss you have sustained in the death of your son, James. He had been with me so long, and I had grown so fond of him, that it is almost like losing a brother. He appealed to me in every respect what a soldier should be – his unselfishness, courage, disregard of personal safety, cheerfulness and willingness at all times were beyond reproach and I cannot speak too highly of his conduct. I loved your son, and his place will never be adequately filled in my section. Had he lived he would have been recommended for an honour. Your son was easily the most popular man in the section, and I know you will be glad to hear that his death was instantaneous and was caused by a rifle bullet. He was very brave at the last and his death was befitting such a soldier – with his face to the enemy and firing his gun right to the end. The action in which your son died took place on March 28 and was a very determined attack by the Germans to capture our positions, and it was only by the steadfastness and devotion to duty of such men as your son that his attack was thwarted. I feel with you very keenly in your grief, and ask you to adopt my sincerest condolences. Please write to me if there is anything you would like to ask, and I shall only be too glad to write again.

Turning to the sailors, it should be explained that prior to the outbreak of war, unusually, the Foreign Office and War Office co-ordinated their activities to a certain degree. In anticipation of a naval blockade of Germany, the Foreign Office issued the Declaration of London 1909. It stated that absolute contraband - arms and munitions - could be seized on the high seas. The list of contraband widened as the war progressed to include foodstuffs, iron ore, cotton and wool. Independent prize courts adjudicated on individual cases. Though not accepted by neutral nations, especially

the US, it did establish a process and was essentially non-violent as far as neutrals encountered it. In contrast, Germany's attempt at counter-blockade by unrestricted submarine warfare employed deadly force without warning and alienated the neutrals far more quickly.

(Slide 25) Alexander Peterson- South Lee Lunnasting (Slide 26) served aboard the SS Hildawell, a cargo ship en route from (Slide 27) Bilbao to Middlesborough carrying iron ore on 20 Dec 1916. (Slide 28) Unfortunately, that day, the ship struck a UC200 mine, laid by U-Boat UC32 (Slide 29); the SS Hildawell sank taking the Master and 22 other lives, of whom Seaman Peterson was one¹⁹. UC 32 did not last much longer. She was credited with sinking 6 ships, either by torpedo or by mines laid but was sunk by the detonation of one of her own mines on 23 February 1917; the Captain, Oblt Herbert Breyer and only two others survived²⁰.

(Slide 30) William Hunter Jamieson of Levenep, Vidlin (Slide 31) served aboard the SS Ribston, a cargo ship en route from (Slide 32) Melilla to The Clyde with a cargo of iron ore on 16 July 1917. The SS Ribston was sunk by a torpedo fired by U45 (Slide 33) – 85 miles west of the Fastnet Rock that day with the loss of 25 hands, of whom Seaman Jamieson was one, together with the Master²¹. U45 was credited with sinking 27 ships until 12 Sep 1917 - when she was herself torpedoed by HM Submarine D7 W of Shetland (at 5548N 0730W). 43 of her crew died; 2 survived²².

(Slide 34) Charles G Gilbertson, Seaman, RNR, B/3305 served aboard (Slide 35) H M S The Ramsey²³ an Armed Boarding Vessel - 1540 gross tons, armed with 2 x 12pdr guns. She was formerly SS Duke of Lancaster – sold to the Isle Of Man Steam Packet Company as SS The Ramsey. As mentioned earlier, in 1914, the British established a naval blockade across the North Sea from Shetland and Orkney to Norway. Initially, cruisers enforced the blockade but these proved to be unsuitable for sustained operations in those waters. As a result, passenger ships taken up from trade and armed, with better accommodation, more room for coal and food allowing them to remain on station longer, plus better sea-keeping qualities, replaced the cruisers²⁴.

At 5 p.m. 7 Aug 1915 HMS The *Ramsey* in the ordinary course of her duties left Scapa Flow for her patrol area off the Moray Firth. Two separate patrol units - an armed yacht and an armed trawler-both sighted strange lights without being able to identify the vessel. About midnight there came through to the commanding officer of *Ramsey* a wireless message ordering him to keep a sharp look-out to the eastward for this mystery vessel²⁵.

At 5 a.m. on Sunday 8 Aug *Ramsey* sighted smoke on the horizon, and in accordance with the wireless orders, chased after the strange ship which was eventually overtaken; half an hour later the vessel was seen to be flying the Russian flag and resembled a tramp steamer. So far there was no reason to suspect her. The *Ramsey* blew her whistle for the vessel to stop. After both had stopped,

Ramsey's boat was lowered with a boarding party. The boat had rowed only a short distance, when suddenly the Russian flag was hauled down and the German Ensign raised in its place. (Slide 36) Simultaneously *Meteor* for this was the vessel in question, opened fire with machine-guns, as well as two 4-inch guns on hidden mounts. *Ramsey* was taken completely by surprise, her decks being showered with bullets and shells, her commanding officer, Lieutenant-Commander Raby, R.N.R., and the officers with him on the bridge being killed immediately. *Meteor* then fired a torpedo which hit *Ramsey* aft where the crew's quarters in this ship were situated, causing heavy loss of life as most of the men were off watch and below. The stern was shattered and the steamer began to sink before a gun had been able to fire in reply.

One of the boats in being lowered capsized. The occupants were trapped underneath, but some managed to reach the bottom of the upturned boat and were rescued by the Germans whilst still clinging to the keel. One or two boats from *Ramsey* were lowered safely, but the whole incident happened so quickly that within four minutes the vessel had gone down²⁶. Nevertheless, The *Ramsey* successfully reported the attack to The Admiralty.

53 lives were lost aboard the *Ramsey* - 5 officers 48 Other Ranks (of whom Seaman Gilbertson was one); however, The *Meteor* courteously stopped to pick a total of 4 officers and 39 men from the water and take them prisoner aboard. *Meteor* – having laid its mines and completed its mission now made best speed for home.

The Admiralty responded as quickly as it could.

The following narrative is taken from HISTORY OF THE GREAT WAR - NAVAL OPERATIONS, Volume 3, Spring 1915 to June 1916 (Part 1 of 2) by Sir Julian S Corbett.

Commodore Tyrwhitt in command of the Harwich Force of light cruisers was contacted first. At 8.40 p.m. the Admiralty informed him of the loss of the *Ramsey*. "She will probably," the message continued "return to Heligoland going east of Lat. 56 N., Long. 5 E., and will probably make for Horn Reefs. Take all available light cruisers and steer for Horn Reefs to intercept her. Do not make wireless [reply], or German directional stations will detect you."

Commodore Tyrwhitt had come in only forty-eight hours before from a sweep into the Heligoland Bight with his cruisers, but by 10.30 p.m. he was heading out to sea with the *Arethusa*, *Conquest*, *Cleopatra*, *Aurora* and *Undaunted* – any one of these warships would overwhelm *Meteor* without any difficulty (Slide 37). Two hours later (12.40 a.m. 9th Aug) Commodore W. E. Goodenough with the 1st and 2nd Light Cruiser Squadrons exited Rosyth with orders designed to cut off the *Meteor* if the Harwich Force should head her back into the North Sea. As soon as they were clear of May Island, the 1st Squadron, under Commodore E. S. Alexander-Sinclair, made at full speed for a point twenty miles to the westward of Horn Reefs, and

Commodore Goodenough with the 2nd for a position midway between the Forth and the Skagerrak. The 1st Light Cruiser Squadron comprised *Galatea*, *Caroline*, *Cordelia* and *Inconstant*. The 2nd Light Cruiser Squadron comprised *Southampton*, *Birmingham*, and *Nottingham*. By any standards, this was a lot of light cruisers.

(Slide 38) All through the night the *Meteor* made her way homewards. She must have believed that she was out of danger because at 7.00pm that evening she stopped to burn a Danish vessel carrying pit-props to Leith. However, about 8.00am on the 9th, as Commodore Tyrwhitt steamed northward, a German seaplane passed over the squadron. *Meteor* was cut off from her base.

About the same time a Zeppelin picked up the *Meteor* and warned her that British cruisers were between her and the Jade River, for which she was making. So the Zeppelin led her northward for the Skagerrak on a course which was nearly the same as that upon which Commodore Tyrwhitt was coming up forty miles astern. He was going perhaps twice the *Meteor's* speed and gaining rapidly. About 9.30am a Zeppelin, *L 7*, possibly the same that had given the original warning, approached the British squadron from the westward and shadowed it at a distance of ten miles.

The Squadron Commodores then received some unreliable messages from the Admiralty claiming to have *Meteor's* location. Though two of them did react, Tyrwhitt largely ignored it, instead holding to his present course.

With such substantial British forces closing rapidly, the *Meteor's* chance of escape in any direction was relatively small. At German headquarters they did all they could to save her. In addition to *L 7* another airship, *P.L. 25*, now tracked Commodore Tyrwhitt. Submarine *U 32*, put to sea from the Ems and a second, *U 28*, which was just returning from a successful cruise, was informed of *Meteor's* plight.

By noon Commodore Tyrwhitt had reached his position off Horn Reefs and then, turning to the westward, he spread his five ships at ten miles intervals. On the opposite course the two Rosyth squadrons were making for points north and south of the Reefs, and the minelayer was caught between the three. At 12.30pm Commodore Tyrwhitt had sight of her, apparently in trouble; she was turning in a small circle, and as he closed it was seen she was sinking by the stern.

It was just before Commodore Tyrwhitt caught sight of the *Meteor* that her commander, Captain von Knorr, knew that escape was hopeless and decided to scuttle his ship (Slide 39).

A submarine was reported by the *Undaunted* four miles from the wreck, the two airships were still hovering round, and for all Commodore Tyrwhitt knew the *Meteor* might have sown the area with mines. For this reason he signalled to a number of trawlers that were in the area to move away to the southwest for safety, while he continued north-west.

In an hour Commodore Tyrwhitt found his manoeuvre had shaken off the airships and he turned back with two ships to search the trawlers (Slide 40). He found the prisoners from the *Ramsey* with a curious tale to tell.

With the appearance of an overwhelming British force, all aboard the Meteor had transferred to a Swedish trawler. As the British closed, an argument ensued as to whether Germans or British were prisoners on the Swedish vessel. Lieutenant P. S. Atkins, R.N.R., the senior remaining officer from the *Ramsey*, insisted on Captain von Knorr obeying the Commodore's signal to steer south-west. He seized the helm, but the Germans were armed and the British were not.

However the Germans, who all along had been treating their British prisoners with courtesy, politely refrained from taking command of the vessel. As a result, Lieutenant Atkins by way of compromise proposed that the British should change onto a Norwegian trawler nearby, which the Germans accepted.

So in mutual goodwill they parted - Lieutenant Atkins with £7 in English notes which the German captain insisted on lending him. This money was subsequently returned with compliments to von Knorr through the American Embassy. Von Knorr and his crew seem to have evaded capture and returned, eventually via Sweden, to Germany²⁷.

Had he survived the war, Seaman Gilbertson would have had a most remarkable tale with which to bore his grandchildren.

(Slide 41) The impact of The Great War on Vidlin must have been profound. One has merely to think today of ten men of the village between 18 and 42 and then imagine those young men dead to begin to appreciate the trauma their loss might inflict on the community. It must have been the same in 1914-18. Nevertheless, it should be noted that enemy troops did not march Vidlin's roads; warships did not bombard the village; bombs did not fall on our shop or hall; our wives and daughters were not raped or murdered. This was the fate of many villages in France, Belgium, the Balkans, Germany and Russia.

But the impact of those ten deaths, felt most keenly here would also have been felt, perhaps to a lesser degree, in Voe, Nesting, Brae, Lerwick and elsewhere within Shetland. The effect would have been considerably less in Aberdeen, still less in Edinburgh and by the time it reached Westminster would have been almost non-existent. However at that point it would have been joined by all the other tiny ripples from almost every community in the UK. That outpouring of national grief was indeed profound. Thus the impact of The Great War on Vidlin remains both significant for us at the village level as well as significant because it constitutes part of a much greater national impact.

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