



## ALFRED MAHON AND HMS BULWARK

**Winston Churchill speaking in the House, 26<sup>th</sup> November, 1914:** “I regret to say I have some bad news... the Bulwark battleship which was lying in Sheerness this morning blew up at 7.35 o’clock...”

**Alfred Mahon:** The details on his service record are unusual. His trade and service are shown as ‘Musician’. He also spent time at the shore establishment HMS Excellent and had courses at the Navy’s Gunnery School, Whale Island.

Alfred was born in 1883 in London, Chelsea. In 1911 his father, also called Alfred, was living in Ivy House, The Platt, Dormansland. Alfred Jnr. joined the Royal Marines in 1901 at the age of 15 and then re-enlisted in 1904. He was in the Royal Marines Band. During 1914 he saw service in the North Sea and along the Belgian coast. At sea bandsmen worked in the Transmitting Stations, i.e. the control systems of the ship’s gunnery. The apparatus was in the bowels of the ship, escape was very difficult and casualty numbers were high. Alfred, however, did not die from enemy action but was a victim of the explosion mentioned above.

His name is on the de Ruvigny Roll of Honour: Mahon, A.W.J. Lost on HMS Bulwark, 26<sup>th</sup> November, 1914.

He is also on the National Roll of Honour:  
Mahon, A.W.J. Musician. RN.

A serving sailor at the outbreak of War he was posted to the HMS Bulwark. He did valuable service in the North Sea and was engaged in the bombardment of enemy positions on the Belgian coast. He lost his life when the Bulwark was blown up and sank off Sheerness on November 26<sup>th</sup> 1914 and was entitled to the 1914-15 Star and to the General and Victory medals.

“His life for his country, his soul for God”

His medals were sent to his widow. His body was not recovered for burial.

The Bulwark was moored in Kethole Reach on the Medway almost opposite Sheerness on the Isle of Sheppey. Most of her crew had been on leave and had returned about 7 a.m. so there was a full complement on board, everything was normal, everyone going about their usual duties. Some were having breakfast. Alfred was on deck with the band which was practicing.

Observers later reported that suddenly there was a roar, a rumble, a massive sheet of flame. The ship rose out of the water and sank back, it was engulfed in a huge thick cloud of smoke; there were further explosions and when all had cleared the Bulwark had disappeared. Boats were sent out from the other ships, including the Formidable with Frederick Gaunt of Vicarage Road, Lingfield on board. In just over a month later Frederick also would lose his life when the Formidable was torpedoed in the Channel on January 1st, 1915.

Of the Bulwark's crew only 14 men survived. Two more died later.

A Naval Enquiry was held on the 28<sup>th</sup> November 1914 during the course of which it was revealed that, contrary to all regulations, 275 six inch shells had been laid close together, some touching each other and some the walls of the magazine. That this was at least a contributory factor was dismissed and it was decided the cause was the overheating of cordite charges stored alongside a boiler room bulkhead.

An inquest was also held on the same day but adjourned until December 16<sup>th</sup> when it was hoped that the result of the Admiralty Court of Enquiry would resolve the cause of the ignition but despite close questioning of naval officers no answer was available. One juror asked yet again "We should like to know how ignition occurred." The Coroner replied "That is precisely what we cannot solve." He was not happy but could do nothing more than return a verdict of Accidental Death.

### **736 men died. No one was accountable.**

The dead are buried in Woodlands Cemetery, Gillingham, where unusually there is a variation of grave stones rather than the usual Commonwealth War Graves Commission uniformity. Those whose bodies were not identified are commemorated in a communal grave. Many bodies were never recovered. All the dead are also commemorated on the Royal Navy Memorial at Southsea.

The inscription on the mass grave reads:

TO THE HONOURED MEMORY OF SEVENTY SAILORS  
OF HMS BULWARK, TEN OF HMS IRENE  
AND BERTIE CLARY A SKILLED LABOURER OF  
HM DOCKYARD ALL OF WHOM LOST THEIR LIVES  
THROUGH INTERNAL EXPLOSION OF THE TWO  
SHIPS OFF SHEERNESS AND LIE BURIED HERE

HMS Irene started life as a passenger liner and was requisitioned by the Royal Navy as a minelayer. She was being loaded with mines prior to embarking in 1915.

The Royal Marine Band Service: Music was obviously important to Alfred Mahon and members of the RM bands were skilled musicians. The bands that were sent to ships were trained at the Royal Naval School of Music at Eastney and had to be able to play orchestral as well as military band instruments and also be able to play as a dance band.

M. Priestley. © 2014

Sources:

National Archives

British Newspaper Archives.

Royal Marine Museum, Eastney, Portsmouth

BBC

Medway Council

Woodlands Cemetery, Gillingham

Commonwealth War Graves Commission