

By Richard Bridges
My Great-Uncle Richard Townsend served as the Commander of HMS Invincible throughout her time in the First World War.

HMS Invincible and HMS Inflexible were the first of Admiral Jackie Fisher's battle cruisers ("Fisher's greyhounds"). Designed to deal with German armoured cruisers they were intended to use their superior firepower together with speed to keep out of harm's way while they pulverised the enemy. She was built by Armstrong Whitworth on the Tyne 19060-9, when she was commissioned. Amongst her armaments were 4 twin turrets housing Vickers-designed 12 inch guns, whose 13.7 metre long barrels could project a third of a tonne shell nearly 23 kilometres at twice the speed of sound.

At the outset of the First World War the German Admiral Von Spee in command of their Pacific Squadron, was ordered home to Germany. He encountered Admiral Craddock with the Royal Navy South Atlantic Squadron off the coast of Chile. Spee's more heavily armed cruisers, Scharnhorst and Gneisnau, quickly overwhelmed Craddock's slower and weaker ships, Monmouth and Good Hope at the battle of Coronel on 1st November 1914.

Fisher, determined to wipe out this Royal Navy defeat, despatched Invincible and Inflexible, still with builders on board from the Portsmouth Dockyard where she was being refitted following the Battle of Heligoland Bight in August 1914, to the South Atlantic.

Von Spee was approaching from the south towards the Falklands capital, Stanley, intending to coal his ships there before destroying the wireless station and was horrified to see the tripod masts of British battle cruisers already there. He turned to the south at full speed. Invincible and Inflexible completed coaling and set chase, both battle cruisers working up to 28 knots [3 knots above design speed] and overhauled the Germans, in what became known as the Battle of the

Falklands Islands on 8th December 1914. Only the Koningsberg managed to escape.

Ironically, HMS Invincible had been at Kielwoche, the German equivalent of Cowes week, in 1913 where the Scharnhorst had become a "chummy" ship. Richard was presented with a model of the Scharnhorst by her Commander and it was with him when the Scharnhorst was sunk with the loss of all hands, having struck the Invincible earlier in the engagement.

On board Invincible my great uncle's task as the Commander was to ensure that everything ran smoothly on board while the Captain conducted the battle. In a remarkable letter back to his home in Ireland he wrote: " assisted the firefighting in the wardroom shortly after a Hun shell had exploded there demolishing the boardroom table, then found that in Pay's cabin [supply commander] the main safe had been wrecked. Swept up the Sovereigns into a sea boot, stuffed navy bills into my pockets and continued on my way. ..." This may have been after the Battle of the Falklands Islands. After repairs at Port Stanley and Gibraltar, she returned to the Grand Fleet in early 1915.

In May 1916 HMS Invincible, having just left Rosyth Dockyard, took part in what became the key naval engagement of the Great War, the Battle of Jutland. She registered hit on the engine room of the Wiesbaden, and was leading the squadron, when she was hit by the Lutzow and Derfflinger. HMS Invincible herself sunk in 90 seconds in the early evening when the midships magazines exploded, and she broke in half, with the loss of all but six of her just over 1000 strong ship's company, including Rear Admiral Hood, who was commanding the 3rd Battlecruiser Squadron.

One of the survivors, who had been thrown clear, said: *"Suddenly our starboard midship turret manned by the Royal Marines was struck between the two 12-inch guns and appeared to me to lift off the top of the turret and another from the same salvo followed. The flashes passed down to both midship magazines...The explosion broke the ship in half. I owe my survival to the fact that I was in a separate compartment at the back of the turret"*

Her loss was the third Royal Navy battlecruiser that day, prompting Beatty's famous remark; "there's something wrong with our bloody ships today!"

My great uncle did not survive the loss of the ship. She is now a protected War Grave 55 metres

deep.