

Petty Officer 1st Class Thomas Justin, Royal Navy [later RNVR Bristol]

Thomas Justin was born in the early 1860's. Nobody was sure of his date of birth, including Thomas himself. He signed up for his first 10 years in the Royal Navy in front of the Naval Recruiting Officer of HMS Monarch on Christmas Day 1880. From that time onwards his official date of birth became December 25th 1862. He and his younger brother Harry had no known father and their mother died in 1869 from typhoid.

After 12 months, Ordinary Seaman Thomas Justin became an Able Seaman on 1st December 1881 and served with the Royal Navy for the next 20 years. During this time, he achieved promotion to Petty officer 1st Class and his service record included such events as the bombardment of Alexandria in 1882, the battle of El Tib in 1884, The Sudan and the Boer war.

In the early 1890s he married an Irish girl from Cobh near Cork and they set up home in Plymouth before eventually moving with their young family back to his home city of Bristol. Following his naval service, Thomas became a Customs Officer in Bristol but maintained his seagoing links by joining the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve which was formed in 1903.

Thomas Justin early in his Naval career



On 2nd August 1914 he was called up again. He served throughout WW1 on a number of ships mainly in gunnery training. His first ship was the pre-dreadnought class HMS Canopus built in 1897. At the outbreak of war, the Canopus joined the 8th battle squadron of the channel fleet under Admiral Stoddart and acted as guard ship at St Vincent then she moved to protect a coaling Station in the South Atlantic. She was then sent to the Falkland Islands arriving at Port Stanley in bad condition and needing repairs. There was concern about the poor sailing speed of the Canopus, she was separated from the main fleet and ordered to sail with two Colliers to the Island of St. Felix where they were to await the fleet. The fleet never arrived as they were decimated by the German squadron at Coronel. The Canopus returned to Port Stanley where she became berthed in the mud at the entrance of the port.

Thomas Justin, Petty Officer 1st Class. Seated, left of picture, HMS Canopus 1914



HMS Canopus was moored in Port William Harbour, Falkland Islands on 8th December 1914. At 8am she signalled "Enemy in sight". In his diary, Captain J.D. Allen RN, HMS Kent gives the following report: *"The Gneisenau and Nürnberg came steadily on towards the harbour until they were only 14,000 yards from the Kent Suddenly we heard the Canopus open fire on them with her 12-inch guns across the land, and we saw the shell strike the water a few hundred yards short of the German ships. This must have surprised them, as Canopus was hidden behind the land. About this time also they must have caught sight of the tripod masts of the Invincible and Inflexible, as they immediately turned round and made off. We could now see the smoke of three more cruisers coming up from the southward: these were the Scharnhorst, Dresden, and Leipzig.*

The Canopus was out of sight of the German ships and fired from the harbour using land based spotters. The other British ships were still coaling and would have needed over an hour to get up steam - they would have been stationary targets for the Germans. The first shot from the Canopus was well short but made a big splash; she followed with some blanks - practice rounds loaded ready for a practice shoot planned for later. The blank shells ricocheted off the sea and one of them hit a funnel on the Gneisenau. The effect of these shots with no enemy ships in sight was to enough to cause the two German ships to panic and withdraw from their plan to attack the wireless station and port facilities at Port Stanley and it gave the British a chance to get up steam and make chase.

After she left the Falklands, Canopus was sent to the Mediterranean to support the Dardanelle's expedition. She had a narrow escape from a Torpedo from a German Submarine on the night when her sister ship HMS Ocean was sunk. HMS Canopus was damaged by Turkish Gun fire on the 28th April and 2nd May 1915 and in October 1915 she transported troops to Salonika. In 1916 Thomas was transferred to the Europa and then a depot ship, HMS St George, before being demobbed from HMS Vivid II in February 1919.

Early in 1920 the family received tragic news. Thomas's eldest son, also called Thomas, was serving on HM Drifter Catspaw 'in Russian waters" (family report) and it was sunk on 31st December 1919. Thomas junior drowned along with the entire crew and he is now buried in Kviberg Cemetery in Sweden.

After the war, Thomas returned to his job as a Customs Officer based at the Cumberland Basin end of the Bristol Docks. He died in 1925 age 63 (approximately!). His coffin was carried on a gun carriage through Bristol to its final resting place in Holy Souls Catholic Cemetery at Arnos Vale, Bristol.

Picture from the local newspaper report: *"the scene as the gun-carriage bearing the remains of Mr T Justin a former 1st Class Petty Officer in the Royal Navy was drawn across the Centre last Friday afternoon. The late Mr Justin was accorded full naval honours, the gun-carriage and seamen being supplied by HMS Flying Fox."*



The scene as the gun-carriage bearing the remains of Mr. T. Justin, a former 1st Class Petty Officer in the Royal Navy, was drawn across the Centre last Friday afternoon. The late Mr. Justin was accorded full naval honours, the gun-carriage and seamen being supplied by H.M.S. Flying Fox.