

## **Alf Stark**

I am Alf Stark. I was born here in St John in 1867.

My father, Richard, was originally from Antony village. He worked on the land all his life. He originally worked as a farm labourer at Higher Tregantle Farm, but then moved into the village when he and my mother Maria got married.

There were five of us kids, I had three brothers and a sister Bessie.

When I was 18 I decided that I didn't want to work all my life on the land like my dad, and I decided to join the Navy. It was exciting and I served for ten years on several ships and training establishments.

England was at peace and I came to love the life at sea.

At the end of my ten years I found myself serving in Swansea. I met a girl there called Brenda, who was from the Mumbles, and we fell in love. I was 28. When I was discharged from the Navy in 1896, Brenda and I got married and we settled down to live on the Gower, which was a place I loved. It was so much like the Rame peninsular.

I had a nice Navy pension and I worked as a boatman and coastguard for the Swansea Harbour Trust, and Bessie and I had a daughter who we called Maud.

In 1911 when we were living in the Mumbles my sister Bessie married George Lakeman and they lived in Ivy Cottage in Jack's Lane, which is now called Mendennick.

By 1914 both my mum and dad had died. Life was good for me, but as an experienced sailor there was some pressure for me to re-join the Navy.

So in 1914 I signed on again. Brenda was upset of course, but I had to do it.

I was 47, and I was happy to do my bit for the war. I served on several ships through the first three years of the war.

In January 1917, I was serving on the SS Laurentic. She was an AMC, which stands for "Armed Merchant Cruiser". But she was a converted passenger liner with such puny guns that we all called these AMCs "Admiralty Mandated Coffins". Lots of these ships had been lost, so we were always on edge that something bad might happen.

It was a bloody freezing January and we were part of a convoy headed to America. We had loads of passengers, but also tons of gold to pay the Americans for the war materials. We left Liverpool on 23<sup>rd</sup> January 1917.

On the 25<sup>th</sup> our Captain Norton decided that we should put in to the little harbour of Buncrana as our ship's doctor suspected two of the passengers had yellow fever.

We dropped them off and our Captain was ordered to leave harbor without any escort, despite the fact that a U Boat had been spotted earlier.

Suddenly all Hell let loose as we hit two mines laid by that U Boat. We quickly listed badly, and this and the darkness made it so difficult to lower the lifeboats, or issue a distress call.

The ship sank within an hour. I managed to help others into the lifeboats and the best of order prevailed after the explosion despite the awful mess we were in.

Those who we got into the lifeboats rowed towards Fanad Lighthouse. Some were rescued by local fishing boats. In the morning many were found frozen to death in their lifeboats with their hands still gripping the oars.

That night we started with 479 passengers and crew, but 354 of us died that awful night.

By the time I had helped to get the boats launched, there was no room left and I went down with the ship.

My body was never found.