Righting a wrong in history at Lyness Naval Cemetery

Wrong date is inscribed on the grave of the last serviceman to die as a result of World War One

By **Craig Taylor**

TWO DAYS after the historic scuttling of the German High Seas Fleet in Scapa Flow in June 1919 — an action which was the single greatest loss of warships in history — a rescued German sailor named Kuno Eversberg controversially became the last sailor to die as a direct result of a war that had ended seven months earlier.

He was shot and killed while being held as a prisoner on HMS *Resolution* in Scapa Flow overnight on June 23-24, and was later laid to rest in Lyness Naval Cemetery.

Mr Eversberg's grave, however, is inscribed with the wrong date, and is marked June 21 — the date of the actual scuttling when, amid the chaos, several German sailors were indeed shot by the British and were also laid to rest at Lyness.

With the centenary of the scuttling fast approaching, the organisation that is planning commemorative events marking the centenary is looking into the possibility of righting this wrong in history by having the correct date put in place on the grave of Mr Eversberg.

In June 1919, Rear Admiral Ludwig von Reuter, the German officer in command at Scapa Flow, knew that Germany would have to accept surrender terms, and the ships would have to be surrendered to the British.

However, soon after the main part of the British fleet left Scapa Flow to go on exercise, he gave the order for the German fleet to be scuttled.

Scapa 100 is bringing together a cluster of projects, all with the ambition of commemorating the centenary of the scuttling of the German High Seas Fleet in Scapa Flow.

Kevin Heath of Sula Diving is one of those involved, and said that the subject of the date on the grave came up at a recent Scapa 100 meeting, where it was felt that this discrepancy in history should be put right.

Mr Heath explained that paperwork exists proving that the date of death on Kuno Eversberg's grave is incorrect, and did not take place on the day of the scuttle. This includes a document Mr Heath himself sourced from the National Archive, which gives details of the shooting of Mr Eversberg while he was being held as a prisoner of war.

Able seaman James Woolley is pictured in court during the murder trial in Edinburgh.

The grave of German sailor Kuno Eversberg, which is inscribed with the wrong date.

A British able seaman named James Woolley stood trial for the killing, but the jury in court in Edinburgh returned a not proven verdict.

Mr Heath is also in possession of press cuttings of the day, which report the trial.

An admiralty memo for the war cabinet, dated October 1919, which Mr Heath has traced, also states: "Shortly after midnight on the night of 23/24th of June at Scapa Flow, one of the ratings from the German cruiser Frankfurt, held as a prisoner of war on board HMS *Resolution*, was shot and killed when being marched down the deck between two sentries.

"After investigation it appears that this crime was committed by an ordinary seaman named Woolley of the *Resolution*.

"There is evidence that he told some of his messmates that he intended to kill a German, having lost relatives himself in the war, and that though his messmates endeavoured to persuade him from his purpose, he lay on top of a turret with a rifle for a period of two hours waiting for the prisoners to be marched down the dock, and shot the first one who came along, who died of his wounds."

The case was passed to the Scottish Courts rather than being dealt with by a court martial, and the murder trial took place in Edinburgh.

The trial heard that witnesses said that 20 year-old Woolley was under the influence of alcohol on the night in question.

The trial revealed that there had been "a good deal of jollification" on board the ship earlier in the night, with rum consumed, as there was talk that the Germans had accepted peace terms.

A witness, John Copland AB, said that Woolley told him that he was going to shoot a German, however witnesses did not believe him.

There were around 80 prisoners being held on the ship, and shortly after midnight on June 23, witnesses received a report that a prisoner had been shot.

A search to discover who fired the shot was unsuccessful, but later a rifle was found.

Shortly after the murder, it was explained that the ship moved to Invergordon where the men were given leave. However, 10 crew members, including Woolley, failed to return.

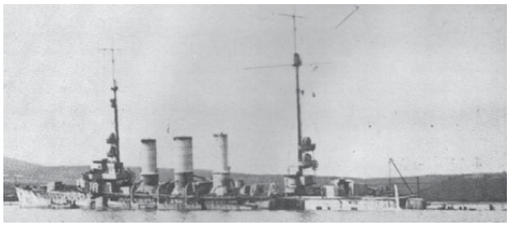
He was arrested in Leyland, Lancashire on September 19 and stood trial soon after.

At the end of the trial, owing to the fact that it could not be ascertained who fired the shot, the case was not proven and Woolley was released, much to the joy of friends and family who were in court with him.

Now, with the anniversary of the death of Kuno Eversberg approaching, Mr Heath and the team at Scapa 100 would very much like to see the correct date inscribed on the grave, and have started investigations to move the plan forward.

Updates on the Scapa 100 project can be found online at Scapa100.org and on www.facebook.com/scapa100

HMS *Resolution* on which able seaman James Woolley was accused of killing German sailor Kuno Eversberg.



SMS *Frankfurt*, the ship on which Kuno Eversberg served before becoming a prisoner of war after the scuttling of the fleet.

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