German sailor's headstone will be replaced at Lyness Naval Cemetery

Researchers shed new light on death of First World War sailor

By **Craig Taylor**

THANKS TO the investigative work of a dedicated group of researchers here in Orkney, an inaccuracy will be put right at the grave of German sailor who was laid to rest at Lyness Naval Cemetery following World War One, having been shot in Scapa Flow while being held prisoner.

Kuno Eversberg died in June 1919, and in doing so controversially became the last sailor to die as a direct result of a war that had ended seven months earlier.

As reported in *The Orcadian* earlier this year, two days after the 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 — the rescued German sailor was shot while being held as a prisoner on HMS *Resolution* in Scapa Flow overnight on June 23-24.

New research by the Scapa 100 organisation reveals that he did not actually pass away until June 29.

Thanks to that research, the sailor's headstone will now be replaced with a new stone, inscribed with the correct date.

This is hoped to be carried out in time for the centenary of the scuttling of the German Fleet, with events planned to mark the occasion next year.

Scapa 100 is bringing together a cluster of projects, all with the ambition of commemorating the centenary of the scuttling.

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 meeting of Scapa 100 earlier this year, when it was felt that attempts to rectify this discrepancy in history should be made.

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

Mr Eversberg's grave 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.

The story goes back to June 21, 1919, when 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, and many German sailors were taken prisoner.

In the case of Mr Eversberg, an admiralty memo for the war cabinet, dated October 1919, which Mr Heath previously traced, 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 were around 80 prisoners being held on the ship. It was shortly after midnight, on June 23, that witnesses received a report that a prisoner had been shot.

Woolley had been heard earlier in the day saying how he wanted to kill a German.

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.

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 the British able seaman named James Woolley was released, much to the joy of friends and family who were in court with him.

New research carried out by Mr Heath, in the form of a Freedom of Information request to the National Records of Scotland, shows military records stating how Frank Elliot Bolton, surgeon commander, Royal Navy, was on board the hospital ship *Agadir*, which was lying in Longhope on the night of the shooting.

He treated Mr Eversberg for the serious gunshot wound through his lower abdomen on the left side.

Despite showing initial signs of recovery, the German sailor died on June 29, 1919, at 3am.

The record shows that the surgeon knew German and spoke with the patient repeatedly.

It says in graphic detail: "He told me that while going to the Heads on board the *Resolution* he had been shot in the back. He told me that he had a sentry on each side of him. He did not say whether one of them fired the shot or not, but gathered from him that it was not one of the sentries.

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

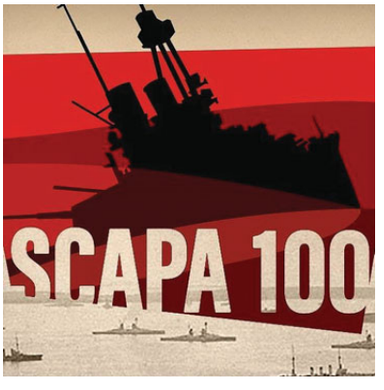
"The deceased's clothing had to be cut off him. It was soaked in blood. It was eventually sent with his body to the floating-mortuary at Lyness Scapa Flow. There was no evidence to be obtained from his clothing and it was buried with the body. Deceased was buried in Lyness Cemetery."

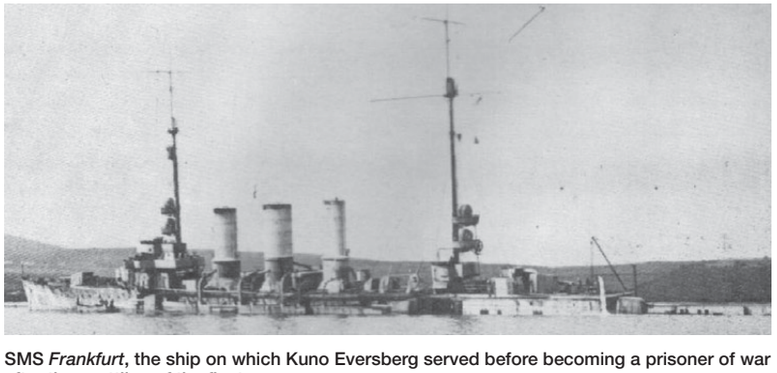
The death was reported at the time to the Admiralty, London, the senior naval-officer afloat and the Rear-Admiral commanding Orkney and Shetland.

Mr Heath explained that following the findings of the research, Mr Eversberg's death certificate was passed onto the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, which was enough to present to German officials to formally request Mr Eversberg get a new headstone showing the correct date.

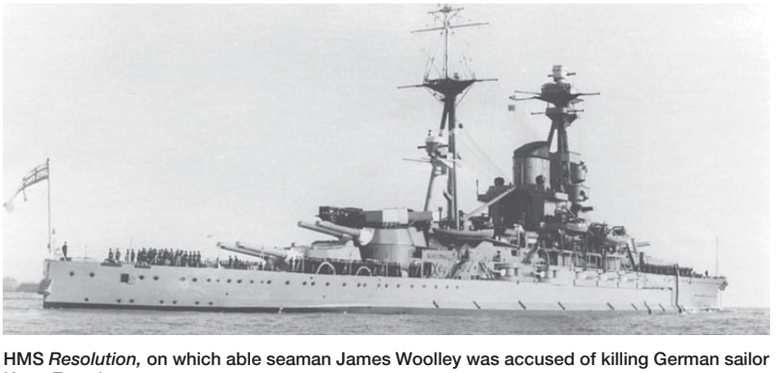
Last week officials in Germany gave consent to change the headstone, which it is hoped will be engraved and erected in time for the anniversary next year.

Reacting to that news, Mr Heath said: "I am glad that we have managed to obtain enough evidence to allow CWGC to obtain permission to change Kuno's headstone and that his tragic story can be correctly told."





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



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