

DEATH AND SERVICE NEWSLETTER

A new year is approaching fast, and as families gather together for the festive season, it is a time to think about those who cannot be with us.

In this issue, we do just that, looking at a serviceman who passed away on Christmas Day 1917, and a devastating attack that killed hundreds on New Year's Day 1915.

It is also a time to commemorate the truly forgotten, and I delve into my other passion – old and antique photographs – to remember those whose names and lives we will never know.

I hope you will join me in raising a glass at 12pm on the 25th December, celebrating our loved ones wherever they are, and pausing to think of those who can't be with us.

Best wishes to you and yours for a peaceful Christmas and a happy and healthy new year.

Until next time.

Richard

ISSUE 32: JANUARY 2026

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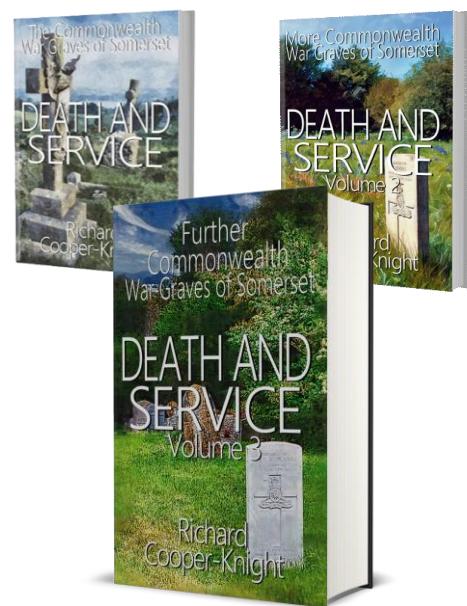
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HMS FORMIDABLE

As the year 1915 dawned, tragedy was about to unfold in the English Channel with the sinking of HMS Formidable.

Commissioned in the autumn of 1891, Formidable was a pre-dreadnought battleship. Initially serving in the Mediterranean, she was transferred to the Channel Fleet in 1908. When the First World War began, Formidable was part of the 5th Battle Squadron, which operated in the English Channel. During this period, she played a role in supporting the British Expeditionary Force as it crossed to France.



On 31 December 1914, Formidable was taking part in training exercises off the coast of Portland, Dorset. That evening, the squadron remained offshore, with Formidable at the rear. Visibility was good, but rough seas made submarine detection difficult. Squadron commander Sir Lewis Bayly believed the threat from submarines to be minimal – a judgement that would soon prove fatal.

“Some 13 miles from Berryhead the [fishing boat] Providence was running before a gale to Brixham for shelter, when Jack Clark noticed an open boat under the lea of the smack drifting through the mountainous seas with one oar hoisted as a staff, from which was flying a sailor’s scarf.

“The little cutter was hidden from view for minutes together in the seething foam. Captain Pillar swung the Providence clear, and the crew, with almost superhuman efforts, took another reef in the mainsail and set the storm jib, for until that had been done it would have been disastrous to have attempted a rescue. Meanwhile the cutter drifted towards them.

“Four times did the gallant smacksmen seek to get a rope to the cutter. Each effort was more difficult than the last, but in the end they obtained a good berth on the port tack. A small warp was thrown, and caught by the sailors. This they made fast round the capstan, and the cutter was harled to a berth at the stern.

“Then the naval men began to jump on board, but even now there was a danger of losing men, as the seas were rising some 30 feet high at times.”

[Irish Independent: Saturday 2nd January 1915]

The British ships were unaware, but the German submarine U-24 had been shadowing the squadron since the afternoon and moved into position as the new year began.

Shortly after 2am, U-24 launched a torpedo that struck Formidable on her starboard side. Her commander, Captain Loxley, turned the damaged battleship toward the coast, and the cruiser HMS Topaze moved alongside to assess the situation.

By the time Topaze arrived, Formidable was already listing heavily. Loxley ordered the ship to be abandoned. Some crew members stayed aboard in an attempt to save her, but the battleship continued to settle lower in the water.

Just after 3 a.m., U-24 struck again, hitting Formidable near the bow. A

full rescue operation was already underway, but less than two hours later the battleship sank. The disaster claimed the lives of 35 officers and over 500 sailors, but more than 100 of the crew were rescued by ships from nearby ports.

A subsequent inquiry concluded that the risks of conducting training exercises under such conditions were unacceptable. Sir Lewis Bayly was relieved of his command for failing to take adequate precautions against submarine attack.

GRAVE OF THE MONTH



Grave Location:

Amesbury Cemetery
Riverside Avenue
Amesbury
Wiltshire
SP4 7BE

Name: Hamilton, William

Rank: Pioneer

Regiment: Royal Engineers

Date of death: 25th December 1917

Age at time of death: 47

Cause of death: Drowned

William John Hamilton was born in Urney, County Tyrone, in 1870. One of ten children, his parents of John and Bella. Little further information is available about his early life, but on 29th September 1895, William married Sarah McLaughlin.

The couple set up home in Ballycolman Lane, Strabane, and had at least six children. William worked as a shop porter, while Sarah kept house for the family.

By the time of the 1911 census, William was working as a general labourer. War was brewing over the continent by this point, however, and when hostilities were declared, he stepped up to play his part.

Full details of William's service are lost to time. What documents remain, however, confirm that he enlisted no earlier than June 1917, and that he joined the Royal Engineers as a Pioneer. He was attached to an Inland Water Transport unit and sent to Salisbury Plain, Wiltshire, for training.

Pioneer Hamilton's Pension Ledger Card provides a tantalising insight into his passing. On 25th December 1917, he died from "*suffocation from submersion accidentally drowned while on active service.*" There is no other documentation to expand on what happened, and no contemporary newspaper report on his passing. William was 47 years of age.

It would appear that Sarah was unable to afford the cost of bringing her late husband's body back to Ireland for burial. Instead, William John Hamilton was laid to rest in Amesbury Cemetery, close to where he had passed away.

Did you know?

My research has uncovered five other Christmas Day deaths, so far. It is a time, therefore, to commemorate:

Pioneer Charles Churchill of the Royal Engineers (d1919)

Private Edward Ham of the Devonshire Regiment (d1917)

Private William Haylor of the Royal Sussex Regiment (d1915)

Private James Jones of the Royal Welsh Fusiliers (d1915)

Private Edward Savage of the Loyal North Lancashire Regiment (d1915)





LOST AND FORGOTTEN

Those that know me understand that, alongside my passion for uncovering the secrets of WW1 graves, I am a keen collector/rescuer of old and antique photographs. I have a collection exceeding 10,000, and a fair proportion of them are, unsurprisingly, related to the military services.

To wrap the year up, therefore, I thought it a good time to share some of these photographs with you. While I share photos on *Death and Service* that I am able to put a name to, the ones here are totally unknown. Their names and lives have been lost to time, and there is no way to identify how or where they served, or whether or not they survived the Great War.

