

LIEUTENANT COMMANDER THOMAS HALLETT ROYAL NAVY (RETIRED).

Thomas Hallett was a remarkable man who, although he did not die in action or from wounds, served his country well for more than 40 years in the Royal Navy.

Thomas was born in Broadclyst, Devon on 13 September 1852, and was from farming stock. He was the grandson of John and Elizabeth Hallett of Woodbury and the son of Thomas Hallett (1829-) and Sophia Stevens (1832-1864).

His young parents had farmed at Broadclyst where Thomas was born in 1852, but the family moved to Ashbrittle, Somerset ca 1855. By 1861 Thomas Hallett's father and mother Sophia, with six children, were still at Greenham Barton, Ashbrittle; there was also a farm assistant and three servants. Unfortunately Sophia died in 1864 and Thomas Hallett's father subsequently re-married Jane (also possibly Eliza Jane).

On 13 September 1870 Thomas Hallett, then aged 18, signed on for 10 years' service in the Royal Navy, and again in 1880 for another 10 years. After a period of training he served in HMS ROYAL ALFRED. She was the last wooden-hulled battleship to be built at Portsmouth, but by her completion she had been "iron-clad" and fitted with muzzle loading rifled guns. She spent most of her time in service operating between Nova Scotia and the West Indies. Thomas was rated Able Seaman and when the ROYAL ALFRED paid off in 1874 he was drafted to HMS CAMBRIDGE, a triple-decker, 102-gun first-rate wooden-walled ship of the line, moored as a gunnery ship off Plymouth. Over the following years he gained gunnery qualifications, was rated Leading Seaman in March 1876 and Petty Officer 1st Class in June 1879.

Over the six years to 1881 his character reference is recorded as 'exemplary.' Thomas Hallett was promoted to Acting Boatswain on 21 July 1881. This made him the most senior rating of the seamanship department in any ship in which he served and was of non-commissioned Warrant Officer status. His rise to this rank was nothing short of meteoric given the fact that he had only joined the Royal Navy eleven years before.

He was subsequently drafted to HMS MONARCH and was present at the bombardment of Alexandria on 11 July 1882. On 15 June 1883 his leg was fractured by a hawser. His record shows 'cured 1 Aug 1883'. It was not uncommon for a hawser (mooring rope) to fly back if tension is released and cause injuries. Not so common nowadays as materials and safety have all improved. Between January 1883 and May 1898 he served in HM Ships IMPREGNABLE, HIMALAYA, ORLANDO, HECATE, BRITANNIA (a training hulk in Portsmouth) and ACTIVE, and was subsequently drafted ashore to Pembroke for Dockyard Reserve. These were times of huge change in the Royal Navy which saw the introduction of iron-clad ships, iron hulled ships, improving steam propulsion, the first battle ships, the introduction of torpedoes, massive hydraulically operated guns and increasingly complex gunnery direction systems. It would seem that Thomas took all this in his stride. The Performance Reports shown on his service ledger were consistently Very Good, zealous, efficient, hardworking, and indicated that he was well worthy of further advancement.

Thomas had married Emma Shapter from Dawlish in 1884. By 1891 Emma was living at 1 Brook Street, Dawlish with her parents and four other Shapter children aged between 22 and 33.

In January 1900 Thomas was drafted to Deptford Victualling Yard and the 1901 census shows Thomas and Emma Hallett were living in the Yard, with her widowed mother Emma Shapter, 71 and a niece Gladys, aged 7. In January 1905 Thomas was rated Chief Bosun, now a full Warrant Officer of which there were not many, and on 17 May 1906 he was promoted to

Lieutenant. He had thus risen through the ranks during 36 years of service to become a Warrant Officer and then a fully Commissioned Officer. Given the era, this was remarkable in itself. The class structure of Queen Victoria's Navy was far more rigid than her predecessors, and in the eighty four years after the end of the Napoleonic Wars, only 4 men had been promoted from the lower deck to Lieutenant – for gallantry. (There may have been a few others promoted at retirement). In 1903, given the pace of change, Admiral Fisher introduced a scheme to promote Chief Warrant Officers to Lieutenant, but this system only benefitted men nearing the age of retirement and didn't really help the Navy in the longer term. This was clearly the case here, because Thomas retired from the Navy, for the first time on 5th September 1907, at his own request at age 55 and his record is marked, "Their Lordships' appreciation expressed of the zealous and conscientious manner in which he carried out his duties at the Victualling Yard, Deptford.

By 1911 Thomas and Emma Hallett were living at 'Meadow Croft', Barton Crescent, Dawlish with the niece, Gladys, now 17. There were no children from their marriage and it seems that Gladys had been adopted as their daughter. Now being fairly well off on an officer's pension, they had moved up from the humble cottages of Brook Street to something more affluent at Barton Crescent.

During his retirement Thomas was heavily involved with the Bowling Club and the Conservative Club (then the Dawlish Constitutional Club).

On 17 May 1914 he was once more placed on the Active List when he volunteered to help with the war effort and was promoted to Lieutenant Commander. In the 1915, 1916 and 1917 Navy Lists he is shown as Lieutenant Commander (Retired) serving aboard HMS ZARIA (for Charge of Stores).

HMS ZARIA was sometimes described as an Armed Merchant Cruiser, although she was in fact a Depot Ship of 3,500 tons, based at Longhope, in the Orkneys.

By 12 October 1917 Thomas' record shows that he was 'sick on shore, suffering from 'muscular rheumatism' and his appointment was suspended on 21 December 1917. The combination of arduous work and climate may have been the cause of his illness, not to mention over 40 years' service in the Royal Navy, and he subsequently returned to Dawlish. He died on Saturday 16 February 1918 aged 65 at his home, 'Meadowcroft'. It would appear that he suffered a bladder infection and blood poisoning brought on by enlargement of the prostate gland.

His funeral took place on 21 February and he was buried in the cemetery not far from the Cemetery Chapel. Amongst the many attendees were his cousins and other relatives, also Major General J H Laye CB CVO, and the Chairman of Dawlish Urban District Council.

Thomas is commemorated on the Devon Roll of Honour and on the Dawlish War Memorial as HALLETT THOS. Lt Cdr H.M.S.ZARIA.

Tribute delivered by Lt Cdr Tom Elliott R.N. (ret'd)