

Bertram Alfred Bizzell

Able Seaman Z/1222, Drake Battalion, Royal Naval Division



Alfred and Patience next to the shop delivery van. Photograph courtesy of Amersham Museum

Bertram Alfred Bizzell was born on 7 July 1893 in Amersham. His parents were Alfred Proudman Bizzell who was born in Streatley, Berkshire and Patience Elizabeth Parsons who was born in Alresford, Surrey. They married between July and September 1892 in Amersham. Bertram was the eldest of their children; he was followed by three daughters, Elizabeth in 1895, Constance in 1897 and Celia in 1899, and another son, Rowland, in 1902. Alfred had a grocer's shop in High Street, Amersham. (The shop has undergone many changes but has recently been trading as "The Grocer"). Many years later Kelly's 1931 Directory showed Alfred trading as a grocer in White Lion Road and also selling glass, china and earthenware, while his younger children, Grace and Rowland, continued the grocery business in High Street, Amersham. Bertram attended Dr. Challoner's Grammar School and he is commemorated on the school war memorial.

"Bert", who was well known in the area, left school at the age of fifteen and joined the mercantile service where he remained for four years. In March 1913 he enlisted in the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve, serving until May 1914. He

was on a voyage from Montreal to South Africa when war broke out and he returned home to re-enlist in the RNVR on 6 January 1915. His attestation papers give us a description of him. He was 5 feet 9 inches tall, his chest measurement was 40 inches, his complexion was medium, and he had brown hair and eyes. He had a tattoo on his left arm and a scald scar on his right arm. He gave his religion as non-conformist.¹

During his period of training he remained in England and managed to get home on leave several times. His last visit home was at the beginning of March 1915 and a few weeks later his family heard he had been attached to "A" Company Benbow Battalion of the Royal Naval Division and would be fighting the Turks on land on the Gallipoli Peninsula. The Company left Plymouth on 12 May 1915 for the Dardanelles with a naval escort as German submarines were very active in the English Channel. After a brief stop for refuelling in Malta they continued to Lemnos Bay where they transferred to a smaller ship before coming ashore via a 'bridge' of boats on the famous V Beach, by way of the well known ship, *River Clyde*, which was run ashore in the first landing to help cover the troops while landing. From the string of smaller boats which ran from the *Clyde* to the shore, forming a kind of bridge, the troops were able to get to the shore without having to wade. The *River Clyde* has been termed the 'Ship of Troy' on account of the splendid way it was used. They were immediately sent forward to the Naval Brigade lines where they came under heavy shell fire as they dug their five-foot-deep dugouts. Casualties were taken from the outset.

Six miles ahead of their position was a hill known as Achi Baba which stands 860 feet above sea level. This commanding position was held by the Turks and from there they could survey the land in front held by the British and French. Shells could be sent in whichever direction they chose. The objective of the Royal Naval Division was to take Achi Baba from the Turks. Collingwood Battalion was the first to advance on 4 June 1915. In a terrible day of fighting the whole battalion was virtually annihilated.

¹ The National Archives Ref. ADM/339/2

These young soldiers had only been in the trenches for one week. The next day Benbow Battalion moved forward towards the firing line, each soldier carrying as much ammunition as he could. They came under heavy shell fire before they reached a gully that gave them some protection, but once in the gully they started to take casualties from enemy bullets. On the third day Benbow Battalion reached the firing line which was in trenches captured from the Turks the previous day. From this advanced position the soldiers were sent out on working parties to establish communication trenches and carry out other building work only twenty five yards from the Turkish trenches. This was vital but very dangerous work. Eventually they were ordered back to a rest camp and whilst there they learnt that Benbow Battalion was to be disbanded due to heavy casualties and the remaining soldiers would be transferred to other regiments. Bertram was transferred to Drake Battalion on 12 June 1915 where he continued with more dangerous trench work.

His obituary appears in the *Bucks Examiner* dated 15 October 1915 and tells us that he was continually in the fighting line. His letters to his parents described some "stiff fighting" and how he had taken part in the fateful advance on Achi Baba, surviving uninjured, which makes the circumstances of his death a few months later on Friday, 10 September 1915 more poignant. The diary of Surgeon Williamson, Drake Battalion records the following:-



Photograph courtesy of *Bucks Examiner*

*"Was called last night about 11 o'clock to see two casualties. One was [Lieutenant] Bligh, who was shot through the head. He was quite unconscious but breathing quietly and I sent him down as quick as possible. The other was a man shot through the chest [Able Seaman B.A. Bizzell, London Z/1222]. Directly I went to feel his pulse I noticed how cold he was, so I got my stethoscope and listened to his heart and found it had stopped beating, and he was dead. A chum of his had come down with him and he asked me if I thought the shot had gone through the heart. I said I would have a look at the wound and was stooping down to get a pair of scissors to rip up his tunic when I could have sworn I heard him give a sigh. I listened to his heart again very carefully for two to three minutes and put a mirror to his mouth and nose and made quite certain then that he really was dead. But for a time it gave me an awful shock! Bligh and his men had been out putting up wire entanglements in front of our firing line and having finished that job without accident they went out again to collect some rifles which were lying about when the Turks opened fire and got Bligh and the other man. King got a message about lunch time today to say Bligh had died at the Casualty Clearing Station."*²

Able Seaman Bertram Bizzell's body was laid to rest behind the support trench by Reverend B J Failes. He was 22 years old.

He was awarded The Allied Victory Medal, The British War Medal, 1914-18 and The 1914-15 Star.

Bertram Alfred Bizzell is remembered with Honour in the Redoubt Cemetery, Helles, Turkey, on a Special Memorial, A 102.³

² Ancestry - Great Britain, Royal Naval Casualties, The Great War, 1914 – 1924

³ He is believed to be buried in the Redoubt Cemetery – Commonwealth War Graves Commission.

Addendum

Since the biography of Bertram Bizzell was written, a poem sent by him to his mother has come to light and deserves inclusion here. The verses below were printed upon a postcard, with Royal portraits at the head. The card was the last received by Mrs Bizzell (High Street, Amersham) from her son before he left England for service abroad during WW1.

May the Lord watch for ever between me and thee,
When we are absent one from the other
Are the words that I send with heart full of love
To the best of dear pals, MY MOTHER.

For King, Queen and Country we're fighting,
"Honour and Right" is our watchword true;
Tho' "Might" at first seemed to hold sway,
Nought shall conquer the Red, White and Blue.

'Twas many months since I left my loved home,
To answer Lord Kitchener's cry;
The parting was hard and tho' she tried to be brave,
There was a tear in my dear mother's eye.

"God bless you" said she, "God bless her" say I
For of mothers no man had a better
And while I'm in England or when I go to the Front,
She knows I shall never forget her.

Mr Nick Fear, after reading the biography of Able Seaman Bertram Bizzell, has kindly provided information on Lieutenant Bligh and two others – Chief Petty Officer, William Charles Flook, and Lieutenant Arthur Melland Asquith – who served with Bertram Bizzell in the Royal Naval Division in Gallipoli.

Mr Fear knew CPO Flook, who survived the war, and often spoke with him about his experiences. He had high regard for Lt Bligh, who was known for sound judgment and good leadership. The unit's *War Diary* reports that on 29 August 1915 Lt Bligh and Lt Arthur Melland Asquith went forward from the front line on reconnaissance. It seems quite likely that Able Seaman Bizzell was with them on this sortie and it was on a similar dangerous operation two weeks later that Bizzell and Bligh were killed. It was known that a Turkish sniper was in the area and had fired on the line several times. CPO Flook told Mr Fear that when Lt Bligh said that he was going out to the front of their position, he warned him of the sniper and said he should not proceed. Nevertheless, Lt Bligh went forward out of the line, accompanied in all likelihood by Able Seaman Bizzell; both were shot.

Lt Bligh had only gone a few feet when he was shot. CPO Flook, who went immediately to his aid, found he was unconscious and had a head wound which was bleeding, but he was alive. He dragged Lt Bligh back into the trench. He was surprised then and reflected ever afterwards that though he was totally exposed and could have been shot by the Turks, they left him unharmed. He promptly arranged for Lt Bligh to be taken to the rear for treatment, but his wound proved fatal. Lt Edward Henry Swinburne Bligh is buried in Lancashire Landing Cemetery on Cape Helles.

Lt Arthur Melland Asquith, who was in the front line with Bertram Bizzell and Lt Bligh, was the third son of H H Asquith, the United Kingdom's prime minister at the time. He was wounded in Gallipoli, was awarded the Distinguished Service Order then and on two later occasions when he was serving on the Western Front. He lost a leg in action and was withdrawn from front-line duty. He had attained the rank of brigadier general. His brother, Raymond Asquith, the prime minister's eldest son, was killed in action in 1916.⁴

⁴ Our grateful thanks are due to Mr Nick Fear of the Western Front Association for providing the detail of this account based on his personal contact with a survivor of the Great War.