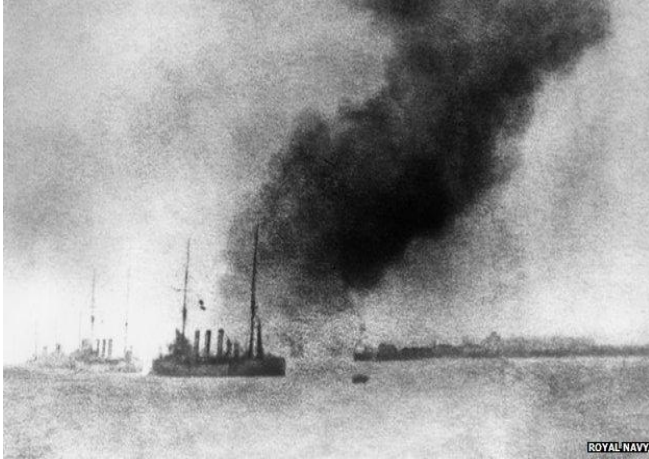


## Ordinary Seaman Gilbert Harold Halstead R.N.

On the 26<sup>th</sup> November 1914, at 0750, the Royal Marine Band had just finished playing on the stern of HMS Bulwark. The men on board were just finishing off their breakfast or preparing to work on the upper deck, when an explosion ripped the ship apart.

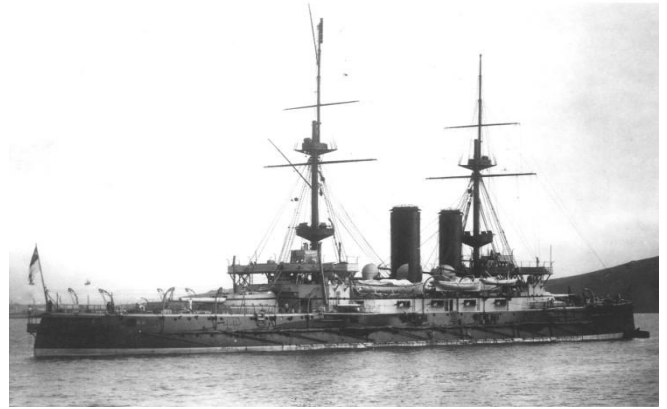


A huge blast ripped through HMS Bulwark in the far distance (Ref vix)

Lieutenant Carroll, passing by HMS Bulwark on the steamer Eagle reported that, "the signal for HMS Bulwark was raised indicating the number of tons of coal she had on board, and then suddenly a large flame leapt up from behind the 'after barrette'. Then the flame appeared to run from the after-turret forward and the whole ship rose in the air aflame followed by a terrific explosion".

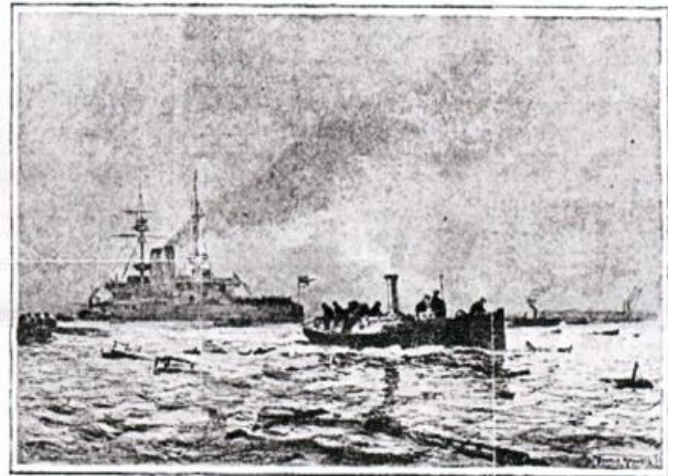
Other witnesses related a similar story and the sudden disappearance of the ship. Sabotage was initially suspected, and divers were sent down to search for the wreck on the 29<sup>th</sup> November. Their evidence, together with eye witness accounts and investigations into the storage practices of explosive materials were given to the subsequent Naval Court of Enquiry. The Coroner, after hearing these statements, pronounced to the jury in his summing up that "the vessel had been destroyed by the exploding of a magazine and it was probable that some loose ammunition or cordite, by some means, had caused the explosion". The jury returned a verdict of 'Accidental Death'<sup>i</sup>.

Gilbert Halstead was born on the 10<sup>th</sup> February 1896<sup>ii</sup>, the eldest of five children and only son of Harold William Halstead and his wife Evangeline. The family lived at 180 Warwick Road, Solihull when the 1901 census was taken, but by 1911 had moved to 14 Richmond Road, Olton. Gilbert's father had started out as a carriage maker and by 1911 had become Managing Director of a Motor Company while Gilbert was working as a gun fittings hardener at a small arms factory. At the time of Gilbert's death the family had moved again and were living at 'Trelasco', Number 21 Clarence Road, Moseley, Birmingham<sup>iii</sup>.



HMS Bulwark (Ref viii)

The ship was moored at buoy 17 at Kettle Hole Reach on the River Medway taking on coal from the airship base at Kingsnorth, on the Isle of Grain. The explosion was heard as far away as Whitstable to the south and Southend to the north.



The crew of the Eagle looking for survivors (Ref x)

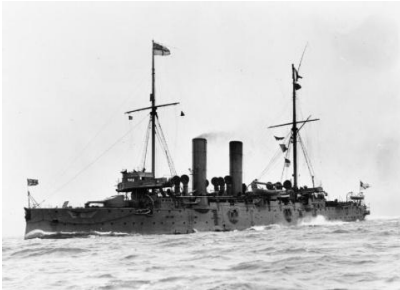


HMS Impregnable (Ref xi)

Gilbert had joined the Royal Navy four months after his 16<sup>th</sup> birthday, at Portsmouth. As a 'boy, 2<sup>nd</sup> class', he started his initial training on the training ships, HMS Impregnable based in Devonport and three months later on HMS Ganges, moored at Shotley, Suffolk.



HMS Ganges(Ref xii)



Having attained 'boy, 1<sup>st</sup> class', he continued his training during 1913 on HMS Edgar (a first class cruiser), then back to HMS Ganges (now a Royal Naval Training Establishment base), HMS Hawke ( a first class cruiser), HMS Victory (a training base in Portsmouth) and finally HMS Bulwark, a pre-dreadnought battleship. By his eighteenth birthday, this fresh faced, brown haired, blue eyed boy had grown 1½" to reach the height of 5' 7". The scars on his hands

HMS Edgar (Ref xiii)

noted in his attestation, when he first joined, were probably down to injuries sustained in his previous employment as 'warehouse boy.' His character was described as 'very good' and his abilities 'satisfactory'. At this point he took the decision to join up for 12 years of service with the Royal Navy and became Ordinary Seaman Halstead. He continued to serve on HMS Bulwark<sup>iv</sup>.

Gilbert's body was never found and was one of 745 men and 51 officers killed. There were 14 survivors, five of which died later from their wounds. A list of all the casualties was published in the Birmingham Daily Mail on the 3<sup>rd</sup> December 1914 under the heading 'The Admiralty Regrets'<sup>v</sup>.



Portsmouth Memorial



Olton United Reform Church Memorial



St Mary's, Moseley

Gilbert Harold Halstead's name is commemorated on the Naval War Memorial situated on Southsea Common, Portsmouth<sup>vi</sup> and also the war memorials in St Margaret's Church, Olton, Olton United Reform Church<sup>vii</sup> and St Mary's Church, Moseley.

Gilbert would have been entitled to three war medals: the 1914/5 Star, the Victory Medal and the British War Medal<sup>viii</sup>. Whether these were ever claimed by his family is not known



**Please get in touch if you know more about this family. His sisters were Dora Robbins b 1897, Margaret Annie b 1898, Anne Howes b 1900 and Mary Winifred b 1906.**

**This article was researched and written by Edwina Rees. [moseleyhistory@moseleyexchange.com](mailto:moseleyhistory@moseleyexchange.com)**

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## Endnotes

- i Coleman, Roger G. 2015. *A Tragic Loss – HMS Bulwark*. Western Front Association, Wessex Branch  
<http://www.wessexwfa.org.uk/articles/hms-bulwark.htm>
- ii WW1 Naval Casualties List  
<http://search.findmypast.co.uk/record?id=gbm%2fnc%2f16520>
- iii See ii
- iv Royal Navy Seamen 1899 -1919 Transcription  
<http://search.findmypast.co.uk/record?id=gbm%2fadm188%2f149926>
- v Birmingham Daily Mail, 3<sup>rd</sup> December 1914
- vi Portsmouth Naval Memorial  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Portsmouth\\_Naval\\_Memorial](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Portsmouth_Naval_Memorial)
- vii War plaque WW1, United Reform Church, Olton  
<http://jewelsvintagevibes.blogspot.co.uk/2014/05/war-plaque-ww1-united-reformed-church.html>
- viii Record Details for Gilbert Harold Halstead –Royal Navy  
<https://www.forces-war-records.co.uk/records/1970683/ordinary-seaman-gilbert-harold-halstead-royal-navy-hms-bulwark/>
- viii HMS Bulwark postcard in the ownership of Edwina Rees
- ix HMS Bulwark (1899)  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMS\\_Bulwark\\_\(1899\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMS_Bulwark_(1899))
- x The Tragedy of the Bulwark: Blown Up in Sheerness  
[http://www.medwaymemories.co.uk/?page\\_id=161](http://www.medwaymemories.co.uk/?page_id=161)
- xi HMS Impregnable  
[http://www.battleships-cruisers.co.uk/hms\\_impregnable.htm](http://www.battleships-cruisers.co.uk/hms_impregnable.htm)
- xii HMS Ganges (shore establishment)  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMS\\_Ganges\\_\(shore\\_establishment\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMS_Ganges_(shore_establishment))
- xiii HMS Edgar (1890)  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMS\\_Edgar\\_\(1890\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMS_Edgar_(1890))