

## Jack Vernon Townsend

Jack was born in 1894 to parents Edward Lawton and Mary Ann Townsend, but by 1901 his mother was already a widow. His oldest brother Edward, then 19, had left home, and Jack lived with his mother, four other brothers and a sister, in Yardley, Birmingham. His older brother William, aged 14 years, was working at a bicycle factory, so there was some money coming into the household, but money must have been tight. In 1905 a younger brother Harry was sent to Canada, a not uncommon fate for children who were considered destitute, perhaps easing the situation slightly, and during the decade between censuses Jack, his brother Joshua and sister Gladys would also have reached working age. By 1911 only Jack and his youngest brother George were living with their mother. Jack, now aged 17 years, was working as an anodiser. It sounds like a relative tough upbringing, but it wasn't uncommon, and at least Mary Ann was able to keep the bulk of the family nearby.

Jack joined the Royal Navy before the outbreak of war, his first recorded service date was April 1913, and by August of that year he was serving aboard HMS Duncan. Launched in 1901 the Duncan was a high-speed battleship, but pre-war the Duncan had been downgraded to a gunnery training ship. She was refitted at the outbreak of the war and returned to service on the Northern Patrol, an attempt to blockade German shipping. Jack remained aboard HMS Duncan until June 1914, then on 3 August joined HMS Invincible, a battlecruiser which had just completed her refit. Jack would have seen action almost immediately in a battle with the German navy in the southern North Sea in late August. Her first major engagement was on the 8 December 1914, a British squadron which included the Invincible hunted down and sank six of eight ships in a German cruiser squadron in what became known as the Battle of the Falkland Islands.

The Invincible remained in active service, particularly in the Mediterranean, and Jack would have seen more of the world than many of his contemporaries. He had joined the Navy before the war, perhaps lured by the possibility of visiting foreign lands. Would he have relished the sounds and sights of places where he was granted shore leave, or did the experiences of war overwhelm him?

Jack served almost two years aboard HMS Invincible, but she was sunk at the Battle of Jutland off the coast of Denmark on 31 May 1916 whilst proceeding to a major offensive with the German Navy. A shell penetrated a turret, blew off its roof and detonated the magazines below, blowing the ship in half. She sank in 90 seconds. Jack was one of 1026 officers and men killed; there were only six survivors.

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