

# Thomas OATEN

Able Seaman, HM Trawler "Liberty"

Died September 14<sup>th</sup> 1915, aged 42

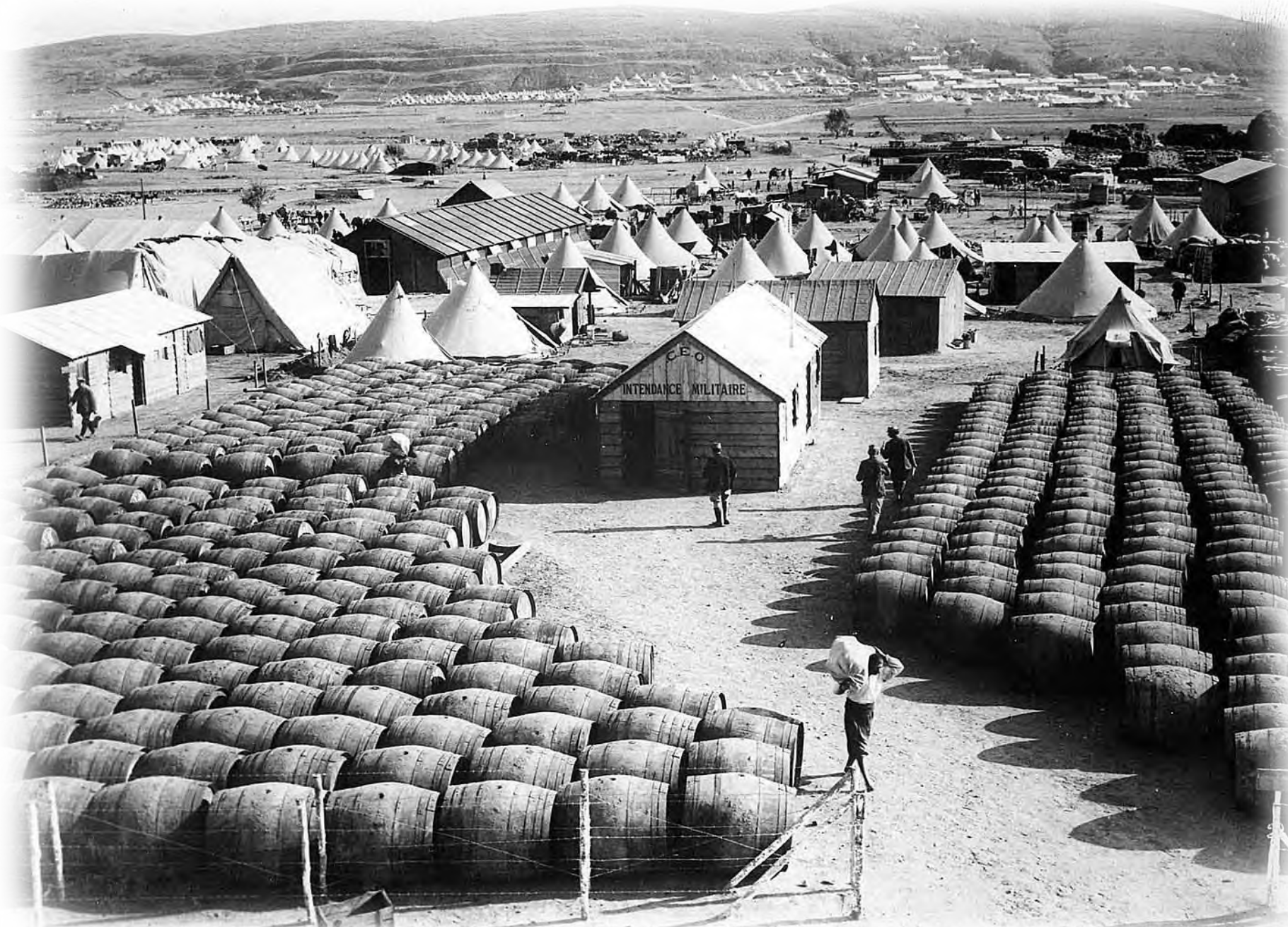
Memorial in East Mudros Military Cemetery, Greece

Thomas Oaten was born in 1872 in Port Isaac to Thomas (*born c1843*) and Catherine Oaten (*born c1841*). He is a much older cousin to *William Oaten*. Thomas came from a large family. Between the 1871 and 1891 censuses, there are recorded five brothers; William (*born c1870*), Andrew (*born c1879*), Richard, (*born c1884*), John (*born c1885*) and Harry (*born c1889*). Those censuses also record two sisters; Ann (*1 day old on census night in 1871*) and Jane (*1 month old on census night in 1881*), but neither were in the subsequent census and may have died. In the 1911 census Thomas senior records that in his 40 year marriage to Kate he had a total of 12 children, only six of whom were alive, so four more siblings went unrecorded by any census. Thomas was then living with his parents, as were Andrew and Harry. Thomas and Harry are recorded as coast fishermen, and Andrew is a labourer (farm servant). Thomas senior is recorded as a labourer, as he had been since the 1871 census.

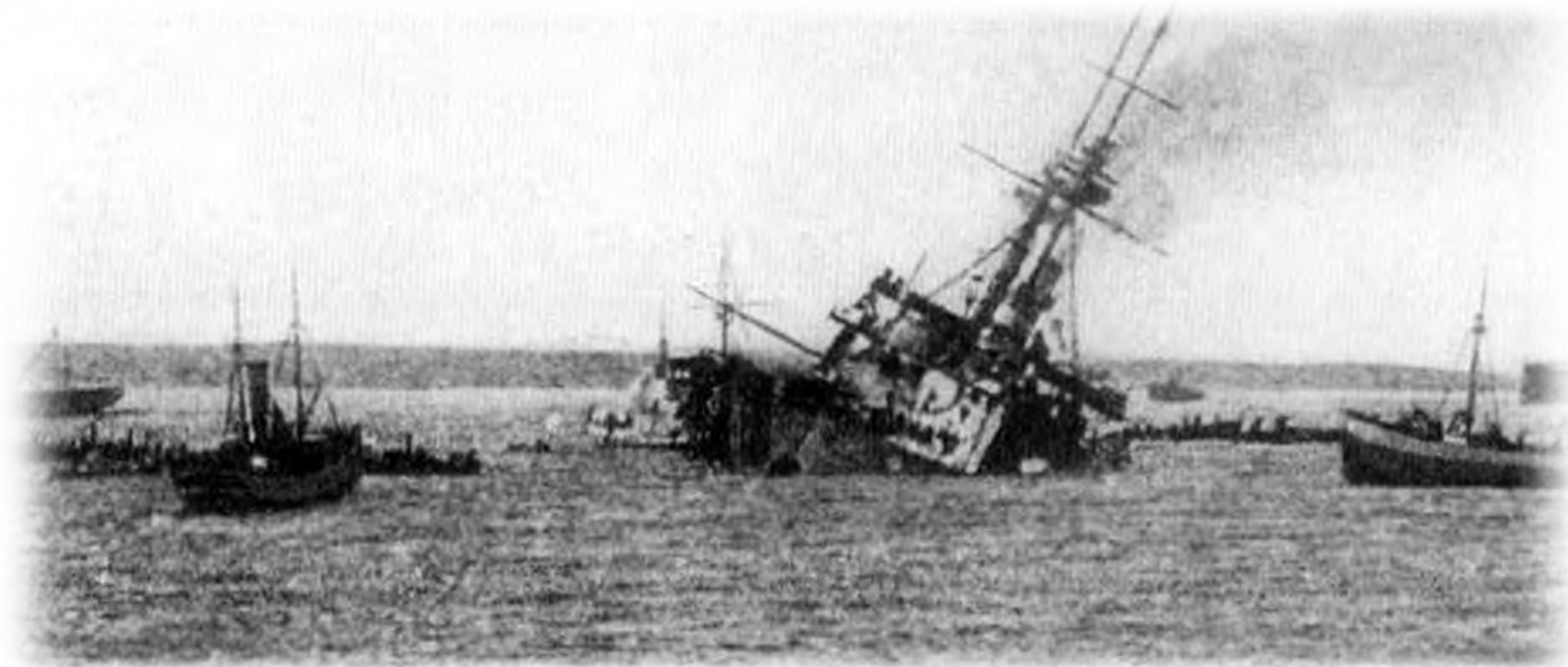
As head of the household, Thomas senior was required to complete and sign their 1911 census return. Interestingly, he signed with a cross, and the census enumerator has written the words 'his mark' alongside it. When Thomas senior was growing up in the 1840s and 1850s he lived in St Teath parish, to the north east of Port Isaac, at Dinnabroad, and then Lower Hendra, where his father John was a small scale farmer. He clearly did not receive the benefits of any education, unlike his children who were able to attend the new board school in Port Isaac that opened in 1877. However, the headmaster considered young Thomas' attendance record left something to be desired. His report to the Board in March 1881 (*when Thomas was 9*) states '*...it will be seen that some of the children have been home week after week... ...Thomas Oaten has been away for 4 whole weeks*'. At that time, children had to pay to attend school and it may well be that a labourer with a growing family simply could not find the 8d (3p) each week to send them to school. These seem trivial sums now, but a newspaper article 30 years later suggested that 7s 6d (37½p) was by no means an exceptionally low weekly wage for Port Isaac's poor. Free schooling did not come about until 1891.

Very little is known about how Thomas Oaten was killed, but the date and location of his grave gives a clue. Moudros is a town and harbour on the Greek island of Lemnos, about 25 miles from the Dardanelle Straits. During the ill-fated Dardanelles campaign against the Ottoman Empire in 1915, Moudros was a key allied base with a military hospital.

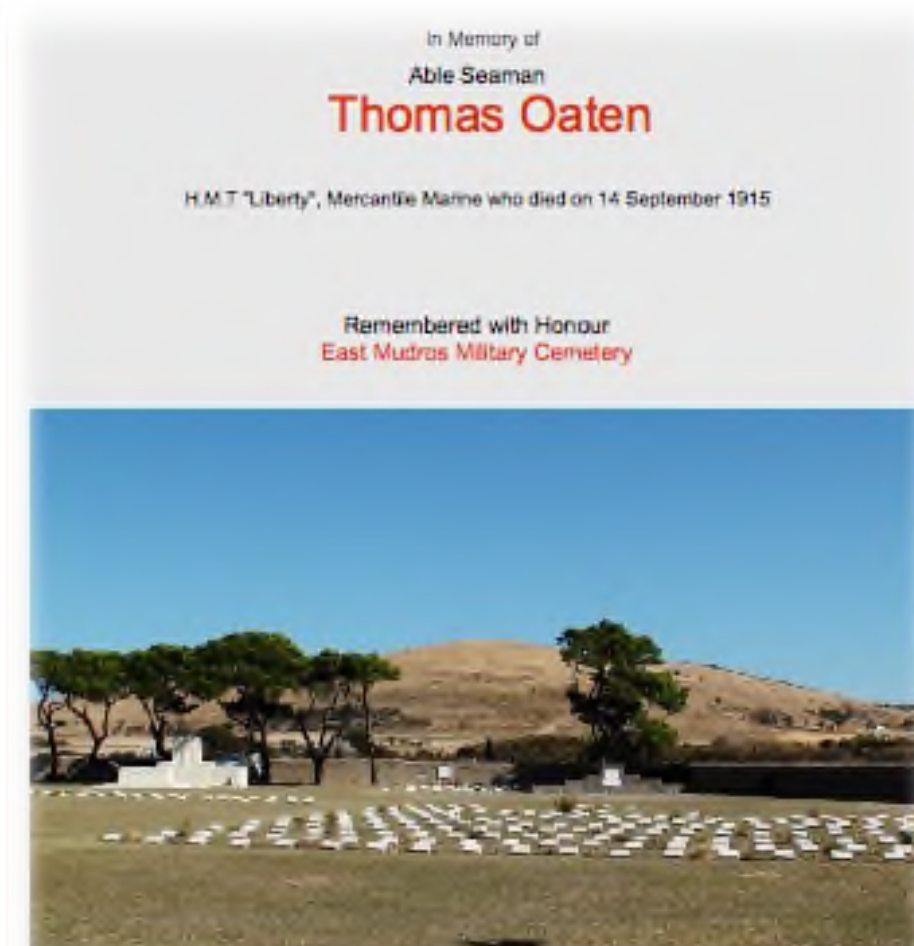
Thomas was serving on HM Trawler Liberty, one of the Royal Navy's Trawler Fleet. Trawlers would have been needed for anti-submarine and mine sweeping duties, as well as transport of supplies. We know the Liberty was not sunk in 1915, as the log books of HMS Hannibal record meeting her in Port Said four years later. In September 1915 conditions at Gallipoli were appalling for the troops on both sides, and summer heat and poor sanitation resulted in an explosion in the fly population. Eating became extremely difficult as unburied corpses became bloated and putrid. The precarious Allied bases were poorly situated, which caused supply and shelter problems. A dysentery epidemic spread through the Allied trenches, while the Ottomans also suffered heavily from disease which resulted in many deaths. In such conditions, Thomas could well have picked up a serious infection and been transferred to the hospital at Moudros. An alternative possibility might be that an open decked trawler patrolling the narrow straits with high ground on either side would be an invitation to Ottoman snipers in the hills if she came close inshore.



View of Moudros base in 1915, with the French hospital in the background



Naval trawlers coming to the aid of HMS Majestic as she sinks in the Dardanelles on May 27<sup>th</sup> 1915



Leading Seaman Thomas Oaten is commemorated in East Mudros Military Cemetery on Lemnos, Greece

## Sources

Gallipoli Campaign: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gallipoli\\_Campaign](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gallipoli_Campaign)

Naval operations in the Dardanelles: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Naval\\_operations\\_in\\_the\\_Dardanelles\\_Campaign](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Naval_operations_in_the_Dardanelles_Campaign)

HMT Liberty in 1919: [http://www.naval-history.net/OWShips-WW1-01-HMS\\_Hannibal2.htm](http://www.naval-history.net/OWShips-WW1-01-HMS_Hannibal2.htm)



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