Gunner Cecil Kershaw

Service Number RMA/2169

Date of Death 17/08/1919

Royal Marine Artillery

Grave Reference NC H 231

In total during the Great War 12 British Hospital ships were sunk either by means of torpedoes or mines. Throughout 1917/1918, unrestricted warfare was waged on Allied shipping by German U-Boats amongst the ships targeted were British Hospital ships. One of these was HMHS Rewa who was sailing from Malta carrying 279 cot and walking wounded cases from Greece. Just before midnight on the 4th January 1918, whilst in the Bristol Channel she was targeted and sunk.

On board was a Stacksteads, man Gunner Cecil Kershaw the only son of Mr and Mrs Kershaw 402 Newchurch Road, Stacksteads. Cecil was a gunner in the Royal Marine artillery having enlisted in June 1916. Originally drafted to France he was only there a short while before being posted to Mudros. Whilst the weather on the whole was good bright warm and sunny during the day the nights were intensely cold. In November 1917 Cecil was suffering from exposure and became ill with pleurisy and lung disease. He was transferred to the hospital ship Rewa, as a hospital ship she should have been safe from attack after being inspected by neutral inspectors from Spain, who had already confirmed she had no military function.

This was not to be however and on the 4th January 1918 whilst travelling through the Bristol Channel she was struck by a torpedo fired from a German U boat. Cecil was saved by the efforts of sick berth attendant Jas Henry Saville, and although they were out of the water they still had to face three hours of exposure in a life boat until they were eventually picked up by a trawler. After receiving hospital treatment in Swansea he was transferred to the Haslar Naval Hospital, Gosport, where he was treated for six months. His health continued to deteriorate and he was transferred once again to the Manchester Royal Infirmary where he spent 14 weeks, later being transferred to a convalescent home in Southport. After undergoing two operations he was eventually allowed home managing to get about a little at time but within a few weeks became once again confined to bed for nine weeks before being moved back to the Manchester Infirmary where he died.

Cecil had attended Western Council School and was connected with the Waterbarn Baptist Sunday School, where his name was placed on their War Memorial. He was very well known in the town as a promising swimmer and was the only scholar of the Western School who had won the schoolboys swimming championship. Cecil was a close friend of Sergt. J. Lord, mentioned earlier in this book another prominent member of the Bacup Swimming Club. Kershaw and Lord together with E C Russell, another local young man, formed a trio of promising Bacup swimmers, of whom great things would have been expected had they lived. They all unfortunately became victims to the war, Russell being killed in January 1917. Cecil was survived by his father, mother, and two sisters and received the Victory and British War medals. Having worked for Messer’s Tricketts Waterfoot Cecil is also commemorated on the Trickett Memorial Ground Roll of Honour.