

Gunner Albert Edward KENISTON

Service number 5575290
Royal Artillery
6 Battery, 3rd Maritime Anti-Aircraft Regiment
Killed in action on 14 May 1941, aged 27

Albert was born in Wells and his parents ran a fish and chip shop in South Street. When the war started he was a builder's labourer and was married with one daughter. He joined the Wiltshire Regiment early in the war and transferred to the Royal Artillery where he manned the guns on merchant ships, the so-called DEMS. He died as a result of enemy action on board the MV (Motor Vessel) Rabout, or perhaps on the MV Rabaul which was sunk by the German raider Atlantis.



The British Legion Roll of Honour lodged at Wells Town Hall
Photograph © Kevin Westwood

Albert was born in Wells on 23 October 1913, to George Henry Keniston and Bessie née Fowler, and was baptised on 12 April 1914, at St Cuthbert's Church. He was their second son, and he would eventually have six sisters and four brothers. They lived at 22, South Street, and his father was a labourer.

His father died on 2 November 1926. At that time Albert's parents were running a 'Fish and Potato' business from 1, South Street; today we would call it a Fish and Chip shop. Two years later it was taken over by his uncle, also called Albert Keniston. Our Albert's mother, Bessie, died on 9 September 1934.

On Boxing Day 1936 a double wedding took place at St Thomas' Church. Albert married Elsie Amy Ford of Bath Road, and her sister Lilian married Kenneth Tolson, from Wareham in Dorset. Albert and Elsie had one child, a daughter called Pauline, who was born on 22 May 1938.

In September 1939, they were living with Elsie's widowed mother at 10, Bath Road. Albert was then working as a labourer for Mr Harry Kingston, builder, of 1, Market Street.

Early in the war Albert joined the Wiltshire Regiment. The *Wells Journal* of 18 October 1940 reported that the Clareville Social Club had sent cigarettes to a number of Wells men serving in the forces including "Pte. A. E. Keniston".

In June 1939, the government started the Defensively Equipped Merchant Ship (DEMS) programme, which would provide British merchant ships with some defence against enemy aircraft and surfaced submarines. These guns were manned by Royal Navy and Royal Artillery personnel. In 1940, there

were not enough gunners to man all of the ships and in March a request for volunteers was sent to various infantry regiments. 940 men responded,¹ and this may be when Alfred became Gunner Keniston.

By May 1941, over 9,000 soldiers were serving aboard DEMS and it was decided to create the Maritime Anti-Aircraft Regiment of the Royal Artillery, from the existing serving soldiers. Later it became the Maritime Royal Artillery. Alfred belonged to 6 Battery, 3rd Maritime Anti-Aircraft Regiment. The regiment then had its headquarters in Cardiff and 6 Battery was responsible for South Devon, South Wales and the Severn Estuary.

All of the DEMS gunners signed on as members of the ship's crew, i.e. as merchant seamen, and were therefore under the authority of the ship's master. As a merchant seaman, Alfred could have visited neutral countries without being interned.

Albert's casualty card says that he died on 14 May 1941 as a result of enemy action while serving on the MV (Motor Vessel) Rabout, and the *Wells Journal* of 18 July 1941 says that he died in the Indian Ocean while serving in the Merchant Navy. We have not been to find out anything at all about the MV Rabout.

A ship with a similar name did sink on 14 May 1941. The MV Rabaul was sunk by the German raider Atlantis off the west coast of South Africa. Six crew and three passengers died, and the rest were taken prisoner. One of the Royal Artillery men serving on the Rabaul, Pte W. A. Fisher, had (like Albert) started out in the Wiltshire Regiment. The MV Rabaul had left Newport on 4 April and was headed for Cape Town. However, apart from the similarity in the ships' names and the date, and perhaps the fact that it sailed from Newport which was in 6 Battery's area, there is nothing to say that Alfred died on the Rabaul. It remains a mystery.

A memorial service was held for Albert in St Cuthbert's Church on 6 July 1941. He has no known grave other than the wreck of the MV Rabout but is remembered on the Chatham Naval Memorial, panel 50.3. He is also remembered on the rolls of honour at Wells Town Hall and Wells Cemetery. Two of his brothers served in the Army during the war, Jim in Italy and Harold in India.

His widow Elsie re-married twice: to John Boyd on 23 December 1946 (who died in 1966), and then to Leslie E Hellier in 1971.

We would like to thank Richard Witcombe for his help in writing this article.

¹ "Unsung heroes – the Maritime Royal Artillery and armed merchant ships", *The Times of Malta*, 17 September 2011.