

## Francis George NEAL

**Born:** 17th December 1877, Tortworth, Gloucs

**Occupation:** Coastguard (Padstow)

**Enlisted:** Plymouth: 1st August 1914 (Royal Fleet Reserve)

**Unit:** HMS Monmouth

**Rank/number:** Leading Seaman: No.178447

**Death:** Killed in action, 1st November 1914

**Detail:** Francis died when *Monmouth* and *Good Hope* were sunk by *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau* off Coronel in Chile. The old out-gunned British cruisers, crewed largely by raw reservists, were no match for the modern German ships and their well-trained crews. Heavy seas stopped *Monmouth* and *Good Hope* using their casement guns and, silhouetted against a dying sun, were easy prey. All 1,600 British sailors died.

**Age at death:** 38

**Military info:** Francis, a farm labourer, joined the Royal Navy at Devonport on 21st February 1894 as a Boy Seaman. On 17th December 1895, aged 18, he signed on for 12 years, with the rank of Ordinary Seaman. For the next 19 years he served in a variety of ships and shore establishment. He became Leading Seaman in April 1905 and two years later was briefly promoted to Petty Officer before being demoted for reasons of competence. In 1909 Francis, now 32, married Jane Merrett, 29, from Wotton under Edge, Gloucs. On 15th February 1911 Francis left the navy and joined the Coastguard. He also became part of the Royal Fleet Reserve, which required him to report for naval duty in time of war. His first posting was to Padstow, where he and Jane moved into a Coastguard cottage at Hawker's Cove with their six-month-old baby girl, Beatrice. Four months later war erupted and reservists were called for duty. On 3rd August 1914, Francis and two other local Coastguard reserves were cheered off by crowds at Padstow station. The men joined the obsolete cruiser *Monmouth* at Plymouth. Also aboard were two serving seaman from Padstow. All sailed south to help the 4th Cruiser Squadron hunt *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau*, two German raiders. On 1st November these marauders sunk *Monmouth* and *Good Hope* with all hands off Coronel in Chile - Britain's first naval defeat in a century. A month later both raiders were destroyed at the Falklands by the navy. All 2,200 Germans, including Admiral Von Spee and his two sons, died.

**Grave/memorial:** Francis is commemorated on the Plymouth Naval Memorial, and he is also honoured at St Petroc's Church, Padstow and on the Padstow War Memorial.

**Family info:** Father: John Neal, born Sherston Magna, Wilts in 1852. Agricultural labourer. Mother: Annie Pegler, born Tortworth, Gloucs in 1854. They married in 1878.



This information was researched by Peter Smith, who is currently writing a book about Padstow's part in the Great War. Anyone wishing to correct errors or supply additional information can write to him at 24 Mallard Drive, Uckfield, East Sussex TN22 5PW. Also phone 01825 762226 or email smithpeter24@gmail.com.

+Lest we forget+