

James Brunton Wilson (1888–1940)



FIGHTING DRIFTERS.
SCOTTISH SKIPPERS DEFEAT AUSTRIAN CRUISERS.

A line of British drifters employed in watching anti-submarine nets in the Straits of Otranto, were attacked by three Austrian cruisers at dawn on 15th May, as has already been briefly reported.

Further particulars of the action, in as far as they bear on the behaviour of the British drifters, are now available.

The drifters were disposed in eight divisions, of about six boats in each, along a line running roughly east and west.

They carried a crew of ten men each, and one small gun.

The Austrian cruisers separated in approaching the line, one attacking the centre, and the other two the divisions of each wing.

In one case an enemy cruiser appears to have acted with chivalry towards the little craft, signalling by blasts on the siren and dipping her flag that the crews were to abandon their vessels.

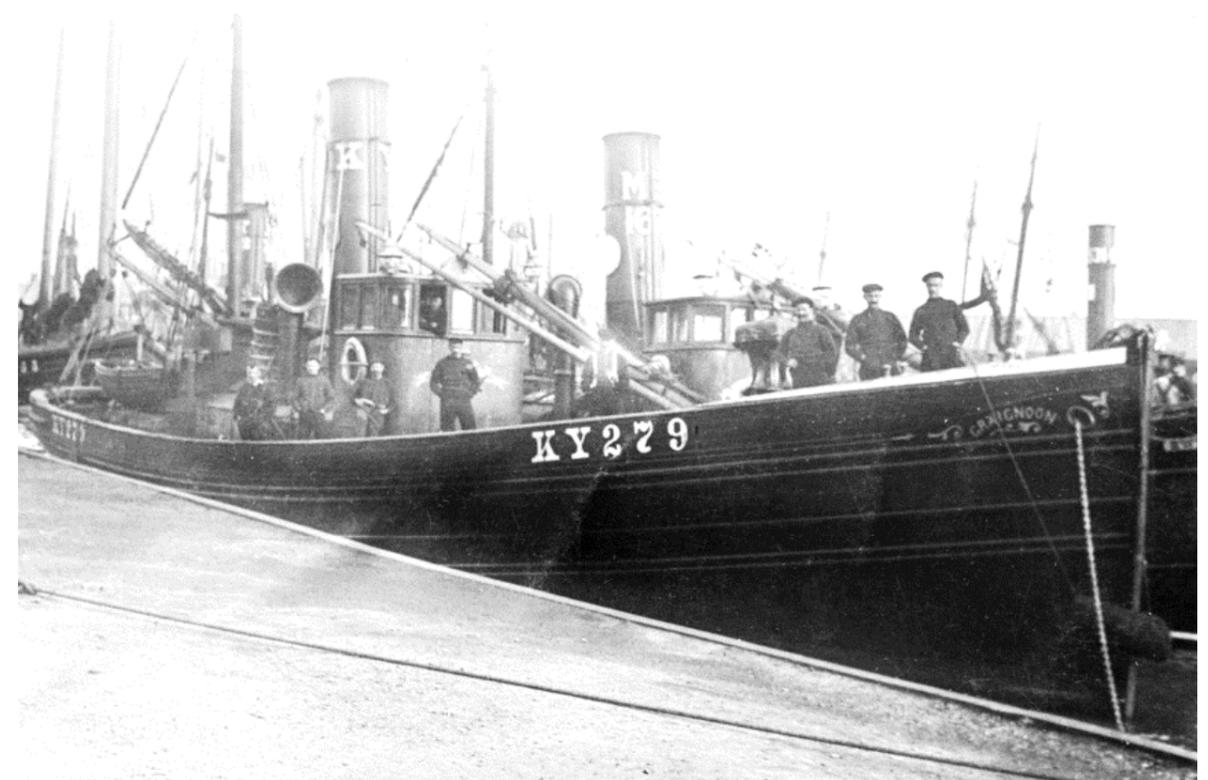
This cruiser approached within one hundred yards of the Gowanlea and hailed her to take to the boats.

James' brother Andrew said: "Their job was to shoot the mesh wire nets to try and trap Austrian submarines." The job of manning the Otranto Barrage was dangerous. For "unknown action" which took place on 23rd July 1916, King Alexander awarded James Brunton Wilson the Serbian Gold Medal, by Grand Order of Peter 1st, for his 'meritorious conduct'. Further details are held by the Scottish Fisheries Museum.

In January 1915, as World War 1 intensified, Cellardyke-born James Brunton Wilson became skipper of the steam drifter *Craignoon*, KY279, one of the vessels requisitioned for duties.

With his crew, he left Anstruther harbour for Aberdeen. First they were sent to patrol off Cornwall, and then against the Austro-Hungarian Navy, off Southern Italy.

Based at Taranto, at the Strait of Otranto, the *Craignoon* was one of forty steam drifters lined up across the Adriatic Sea, forming a barrage between Brindisi and Corfu, a distance of 45 miles (72 km).



The *Craignoon* was involved in the Battle of Otranto in May 1917. Austro-Hungarian destroyers set out, under cover of darkness, to destroy the barrage of drifters.

When the *Craignoon* was hit, James ordered his crew into the lifeboat and he was the last to leave and almost lost his life when the wheelhouse blew up. Engineer John M. Smith, in *Memories of a First World War Sailor*, wrote: “The second shell must have hit the boiler with high steam pressure on for our ship blew up in pieces.” James and seventy other sailors were captured in the battle and spent the rest of the war as prisoners of war in Austria.



James Brunton Wilson continued to skipper many boats after WW1. During WW2 he died of natural causes aboard the *William Wilson* while serving at Scapa Flow.