

## OTAKI SHIELD

On 10 March 1917, a heavily armed German raider, the "Moewe", commanded by Count Dohna-Sclodien, sighted the New Zealand Shipping Company's freighter "Otaki", commanded by Lieutenant Bissett-Smith, RNR, en route from London to New York. The story of the ensuing action which took place 300 miles east of St Miguel in the Azores has been told by Hector Bywater in the "Daily Telegraph":

"The 'Moewe' signalled the 'Otaki' to heave to, but Captain Smith paid no attention. He held on his course at his best speed, which was 15 knots. The 4.7 inch gun at the stern was cleared away, fire parties were mustered, and everything made ready for a desperate resistance. As the British ship ignored a shot fired across her bows, the 'Moewe' opened up on her with two six-inch guns and one four-inch gun served by picked gunlayers of the German Navy.

The 'Otaki' instantly replied with her one small gun, the shell pitching short. Then the enemy's six-inch shells began to drive home. Two pierced the hull below the gun, but it remained in action and soon scored a hit on the 'Moewe's' waterline forward. The shell burst well inside, killing two men and blowing large holes in the hull under water. This shot nearly sealed the raider's doom, for the sea poured into the ship and she took a list of 15 degrees to port, besides being down by the head. The sea was rough, and for a time she was well in danger of foundering on the spot, but her guns continued to fire and the 'Otaki' was hit four times more before she scored another hit on the 'Moewe's' signal deck. She followed this by putting a shell into the raider's coal bunkers. A violent explosion followed and the fire in the bunkers could not be subdued. All that night the raider lay helpless.

The gunnery officer of the 'Moewe' writes: 'At every moment we expect either to sink or to blow up. The deck beneath our feet grew too hot and the bulkheads and part of the hull plating glowed with fierce heat. Our position was desperate. It took us two days to extinguish the fire and stop the leaks. In spite of our three-to-one superiority in armament (actually six-to-one) the 'Otaki' had come within a hair's breadth of putting an end to our career'.

The 'Otaki' went down with her colours flying. Captain Smith, having ordered his men into the boats, remained. He was awarded a posthumous VC - one of the only two VCs awarded to the Merchant Service during the war."

To commemorate this gallant action, the relatives of the late Captain Smith provided a fund to enable an annual award to be made to the pupil of Robert Gordon's College (his old school) who proved pre-eminent in character, leadership and athletics.

On hearing of this award, the New Zealand Shipping Company decided to add to the commemoration of the action of one of its ships by providing the winner of the Shield with a free return passage to New Zealand.

When these facts became known to the New Zealand Government, it was decided that the winner of the Otaki Shield should be provided with transport and accommodation in New Zealand to enable the winner to make a comprehensive tour of the country. As the scholar is a Guest of Government, the Department of Internal Affairs is responsible for the itinerary.