

# SANDISON FAMILY OF CATFIRTH

**David H Sandison**, Guardsman, Scots Guards. Catfirth, South Nesting. A prolific and very well known poet and playwright.

Their parents were Hunter Sandison and Mary Ann Goudie. They had two sisters and one younger brother.



**Robert Goudie Sandison**, Seaman, R.N.R., H.M. Auxiliary Cruiser *Laurentic*. Son of the late Hunter and Mary A Sandison, Catfirth. Lost off the Irish coast January 25th 1917, aged 22.

On the 25 January 1917, the 14,892-ton liner *Laurentic*, which had been converted into an Armed Auxiliary Cruiser, hit a mine off the coast of Northern Ireland 55° 17'78N 7° 42'154W. In her strong rooms were 43 tons of gold, in 3211 separate gold ingots, valued then at more than £5 million, being taken to the United States to pay for food, steel, and munitions which Britain needed to continue the war against Germany. The *Laurentic* sank so swiftly that 354 of 745 men aboard were lost and there was certainly no time to worry about the strong room.

As a direct result of that sinking, Commander Guybon Chesney Castell Damant C.B.E., a famous Navy diver, was told by the Admiralty he could have as many divers as he wanted and he could have them now. The recovery of the *Laurentic* gold was to be his top priority and he was ordered to start work immediately. He called in another well known Navy diver, Dusty Miller, and the rest of the so called 'Tin Openers', due to their work penetrating sunken U-boats, who were now set to work to prise gold ingots from the *Laurentic*. They were told to do it as quickly as possible as the British Government feared that aid from America would dry up if there was no gold to back up the buying power of the British pound.

On the 14th day of diving after blasting their way through to the strong room, Miller smashed open its steel door with a sledgehammer and chisel. On entering he found himself facing stacks of bullion boxes each weighting 140 pounds. Even though he was over his bottom time, Dusty manhandled one of the boxes back to the deck and the next day on his 60-minute 'shift' he got out another three. He had almost single-handedly recovered £32,000 worth of gold!

However, Dusty Miller was to pay a price for all that gold. Cautious diving had been suspended for the duration and even more so for the *Laurentic* gold recovery. Shortly after his first haul of gold he had suffered a bad attack of the 'bends' with acute pain in his joints. Most of the official comments seemed to be surprised that Dusty had been a bends victim as he had been considered relatively immune since his early diving training. The attack was, they thought, brought on by the heavy boxes of gold. He seems to have received some recompression treatment in a chamber on board.

Even so, the series of northerly gales, which then stopped all diving, must have been a god-sent rest for Dusty. After a solid week of huge winds and seas, Dusty and the other divers returned to the wreck, and Commander Damant went down himself. He found that the storm had turned, twisted and folded the wreck almost in half. The passage way that Dusty had used to bring up the gold boxes was now only 18 inches high and the depth of the entry point has increased from 62 feet to 103.

After a week's more work by divers with explosives, Dusty re-entered the strong room. It was empty! All the gold ingots had slipped through holes torn in the walls and floor and had tumbled down into the tangled and twisted wreckage of the bilges. More explosives were used to cut a hole down to the gold's new resting place. Dusty then had another attack of the bends. He had worked hard for 90 minutes at 115 feet and, according to Navy dive tables, should have been decompressed for 87 minutes. He was actually given 40 minutes. Perhaps he really was more tolerant of the bends than others, because he continued diving.

By September the divers had recovered over £800,000. In April 1917 America entered the war. Immediately, the urgency of recovering the gold eased. The Admiralty ordered work on the *Laurentic* to be halted for the duration. It was not until 1919 that the divers once again returned to claim the Treasury's gold. Finally after cutting up almost the whole ship with explosives, there were only 25 bars still missing. Each diver got a bonus of two shillings and sixpence for every £100 raised. Another salvage operation in 1930 recovered three more bars of gold. In July 1987 yet another operation, using bell divers, failed to find any of the other 22 bars, which are now said to be worth some £2million.