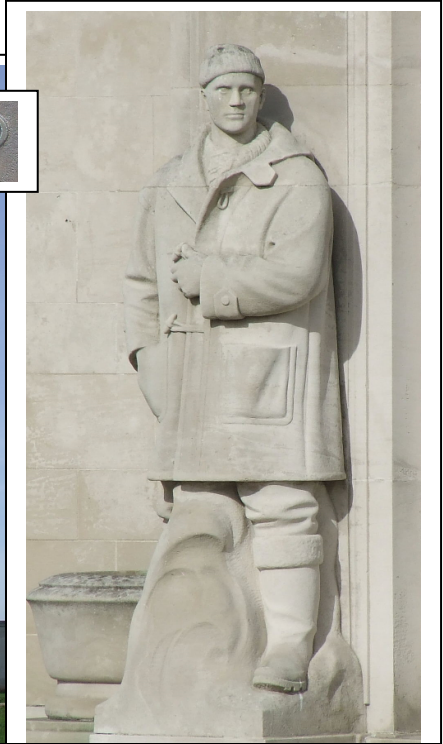




DECK HAND  
ABBOTT M.



Deck Hand Maxwell Abbott, Number 1672x of the Royal Naval Reserve (Newfoundland), but who later was transferred and served as DA (*Deck Hand*) 10521 of the Royal Naval Reserve, is honoured on the Chatham Naval Memorial in the English county of Kent.

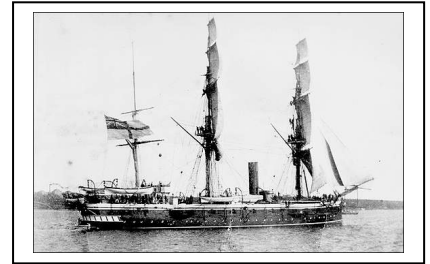
Having *answered the call* of the naval authorities for volunteers, Maxwell Abbott travelled from the community of Bayley's Cove, Bonavista, to St. John's, capital city of the Dominion of Newfoundland. He there presented himself for enlistment on February 16 of 1915, reporting to the Naval Reserve training ship HMS *Calypso*...moored in the local harbour.

On or about that same February 16 he signed on to serve for a single year's\* service and underwent a satisfactory medical assessment on the morrow as well as a month of training until March 16 when he was promoted to the rank of Seaman. Maxwell Abbott also likely attested at this time, pledging his allegiance to the King-Emperor, George V.



(Preceding page: George V, by the Grace of God, of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland and of the British Dominions beyond the Seas, King, Defender of the Faith, Emperor of India: as a boy and young man he had served in the Royal Navy from 1877 until 1891 and always retained a fondness for the Senior Service. – The photograph of the King attired in the uniform of an Admiral of the Fleet is from *the Royal Collection Trust* web-site and taken in or about 1935.)

(Right: At the outset of their career, the ‘Calypso-Class’ ships were apparently considered to be superior vessels. Hybrids - powered by both steam and sail - they were able to police the outer reaches of the British Empire most efficiently and economically. The rapid progress in engine technology, however, was to mean that HMS ‘Calypso’ and her sister-ships would soon be out-classed by newer vessels. – This Royal Navy photograph, taken before 1902 when the drill-hall was reportedly built on her upper deck and the funnel removed, is from *Wikipedia*)



*\*In the early days of the War, perhaps because it was felt by the authorities that it would be a conflict of short duration, the recruits enlisted for only a single year. As the War progressed, however, this was obviously going to cause problems and the men were encouraged to re-enlist. Later recruits – as of or about May of 1916 - signed on for the ‘Duration’ at the time of their original enlistment.*



(Right above: The White Ensign has been flown by the Royal Navy in its present form since about the year 1800 although other naval ensigns had existed for at least two centuries. It consists of a red St. George's Cross – the national flag of England - on a white field with the Union Flag\* in the upper canton.

*\*The Union Flag is commonly referred to as the ‘Union Jack’; this is, in fact, a misnomer since a flag is referred to as a ‘Jack’ only when flown from the bow of a ship.*



(Right above: Recruits of the Royal Naval Reserve (Newfoundland) seen here in front of HMS ‘Calypso’. The shed-like superstructure seen behind them had been built onto the ship in 1902 to serve as a drill-hall. Whether the vessel was still ‘Calypso’, or had become ‘Briton’ by this time (see further below) is not clear. – photograph from Newfoundland Provincial Archives via *Wikipedia*)

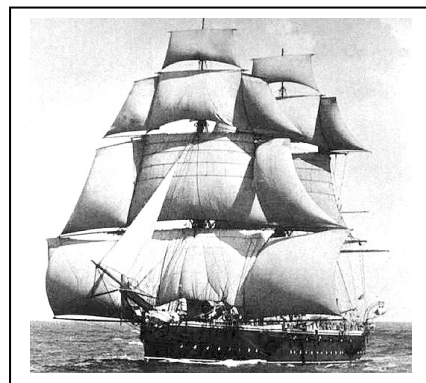
Note: During the years preceding the Great War the only military force on the Island of Newfoundland – apart from a handful of ill-fated local attempts – was to be the Royal Naval Reserve (Newfoundland). Even so, it was to be some thirty years after the withdrawal of British troops from the Dominion in 1870 before the Reserve came into being in 1902.

*Just fewer than four-hundred men were sought to enroll as seamen – apparently automatically at the rank of Able Seaman - and to present themselves annually in St. John's for five years in order to train for a period of twenty-eight days per annum. Allowed to report at a time of their own choosing, it is perhaps not surprising that these volunteers – mostly fishermen – were to opt to train during the winter months when fishing work was minimal.*

*Expenses were apparently defrayed for the most part by the British (Imperial) Government and an attempt was made to ensure the number of recruits would be kept constantly at a maximum. This practice and policy was then to be continued up until the onset of hostilities some twelve years later.*

*Of course, the purpose of having a reserve force at any time is to provide a trained force ready at any time to serve at a time of need or crisis. Thus in August of 1914, upon the Declaration of War by the government in London, hundreds of those men of the Royal Naval Reserve (Newfoundland) were to make their way to St. John's, from there to take passage overseas to bolster the ranks of the Royal Navy.*

*An elderly vessel, HMS 'Calypso', having become surplus to the Admiralty's needs, had been provided to the Dominion of Newfoundland by the Royal Navy in 1902 for training purposes. After some debate it was eventually decided that she would be permanently moored in the harbour of the capital, her superstructure reduced, and a wooden shelter built on her upper deck to provide training facilities and living quarters for the prospective naval recruits.*

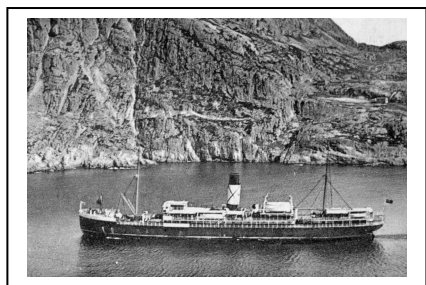


*(Right: HMS 'Calypso' in full sail. She was to be re-named 'Briton' in 1916 when a new 'Calypso', a modern cruiser, was launched by the Royal Navy. – Royal Navy photograph of 1898 by courtesy of Admiralty House Museum)*

*Only thirty-two days after having first reported in St. John's – twenty-eight of which to be spent in training\* and, as seen above, on March 16 having been elevated from the rank of Seaman Recruit - the now-Seaman Abbott, one of a draft of seventy naval reservists, departed Newfoundland on March 20 on board the Bowring Brothers' vessel *Stephano* for passage to Halifax. From there the sailors were to subsequently traverse the Atlantic on board the ocean-liner *Orduña*.*

*\*It appears that in many cases, even if the recruit in question had not already previously been with the Royal Naval Reserve, the required twenty-eight day training period, all or partially, was at times waived.*

*They were not to travel alone from St. John's: 'D' Company of the Newfoundland Regiment was also to make the voyage on its way to Scotland to join the Newfoundland contingent already serving there at Edinburgh Castle.*



*(continued)*

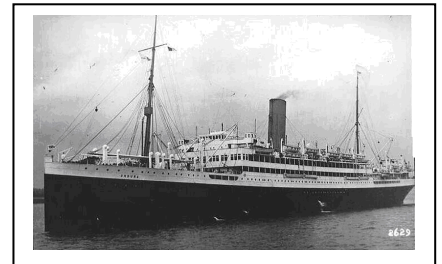
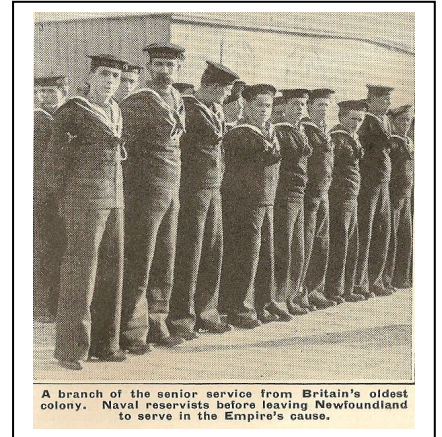
(Preceding page: *The photograph of 'Stephano' sailing through the Narrows of St. John's Harbour is by courtesy of the Provincial Archives.*)

(Right: *Naval reservists from Newfoundland, during the early days of the Great War, before their departure for the United Kingdom - from *The War Illustrated**)

(Right below: *The recently-built 'Orduña' – the vessel constructed in 1913-1914 - was requisitioned during the Great War for use as an armed merchant cruiser and also as a troop transport.*

*Twenty years afterwards to be involved with the unfortunate Jewish refugees in the 'Voyage of the Damned' affair, the vessel was later again to be used as a troopship and an evacuation transport during the conflict of 1939-1945 before being finally laid up in 1950. – photograph from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site)*

Once having disembarked from *Orduña* in the port-city of Liverpool it appears that several of the men were thereupon posted directly to a ship. Others were ordered to proceed to various Royal Navy establishments and thus, likely having journeyed by train, reported to these bases on or about March 30.



In the case of Seaman Maxwell Abbott, the destination was to be a shore-based facility, *HMS Vivid I*.

*\*The Royal Navy had a disciplinary system which in certain ways differed from civil – and even Army – law; but for it to be employed, a sailor had to be attached to a ship. While at sea, of course, this posed no problem, but when a sailor was performing duties on land that were not associated directly to a particular ship he still had to be held accountable for any untoward behaviour.*

*The Navy's training establishments were for the most part on land: Devonport (although apparently only a shore-base during the Great War), Chatham, and Portsmouth for example, were land bases for many thousands of naval personnel, some of who were permanently stationed there. Thus the practice became to base an elderly or even obsolete ship in the nearby port to be, nominally, the vessel to which this personnel was to be attached. This appears to have been the procedure for the large number of shore bases organized around the coast of the United Kingdom during the Great War.*

*HMS Vivid, the base to which Seaman Abbott had been ordered after his arrival in the United Kingdom from Newfoundland, was not only all the buildings and facilities on shore, but also a small, elderly, nondescript depot ship (originally HMS 'Cukoo', built 1873), to which all the naval personnel was attached and was the name to be emblazoned on the bands of their caps.*

(Right: *One of the gateways to the once-Royal Navy establishment at Plymouth-Devonport – photograph from 2011(?)*)



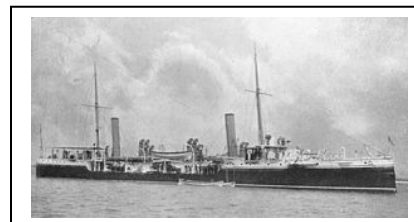
Seaman Abbott was to serve at *Vivid I* from the time of his arrival in the United Kingdom until April 19 of 1915. But it was during this period, on February 16, 1916, it appears that he was transferred to the *Armed Trawler Section* as a Deck Hand. And it was also on that date that he was transferred to the Royal Naval Reserve and assigned the number DA 10521.

This unfortunately means that as of February 16 of 1916, there appear to be no official records available in Newfoundland of his subsequent doings; but fortunately we have access to the British documentation. The following nine months were to be a busy time for Deck Hand Abbott.

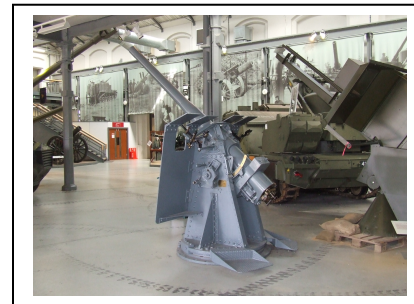
*\*The rank of Deck Hand has been difficult to categorize as it may not have been a formal rank at all; the only Newfoundland Reservists who attained it were at the time serving in the Royal Naval Reserve, but not the Newfoundland Section. Thus it may have been an informal rank of sorts for men of the Naval Reserve, particularly in the trawler Section, men who were a sort of jack-of-all-trades and experienced sailors respected for their expertise. However, beyond venturing that explanation, finding an official description of a Deck Hand has proved to be difficult.*

(Right below: *The photograph of the Dryad-class torpedo-boat HMS ‘Halcyon’ is from the Wikipedia web-site.*)

Deck Hand Abbott’s first assignment was for just days more than twelve weeks and was to HMS *Halcyon* which, at the outset of the War was to be that of the command ship of the Senior Naval Officer North Sea Fisheries working out of the North Sea port of Yarmouth. However, what Seaman Abbott’s duties were appears not to be documented; not does the history of HMS *Halcyon* at this time enlighten the reader, perhaps suggesting that the highlights of each day were nothing but its routines.



It would appear that while at *Halcyon* Deck Hand Abbott was not to serve on the parent-ship but on a small requisitioned trawler, *St. Cyr*. A vessel of some three-hundred tons and built in 1915, she had been armed with a single twelve-pounder naval weapon before being ordered into war-time service as a mine-sweeper.



(Right above: *A quick-firing naval twelve-pounder (the weight of the shell) here seen adapted for use in 1941. – photograph taken at the Royal Artillery Museum ‘Firepower’ at Woolwich in 2010*)

(continued)

On May 16 Deck Hand Abbott was on the move to the south, to the River Thames and there to the *Nore Command*, responsible for the safety of shipping in the estuary of the waterway leading to the British capital and to the large area of docklands to the city's east. The headquarters of the *Command*, HMS *Actaeon* by name – which was at the same time also acting as a torpedo-school - were at Sheerness on the Isle of Sheppey.

Once again we are not privy to the services rendered to HMS *Actaeon* by Deck Hand Abbott. Indeed, it is not even clear as to whether he was posted to *Actaeon* the ship or to *Actaeon* the shore-based facilities. Whatever the case, he was to be there for eleven weeks less a day.

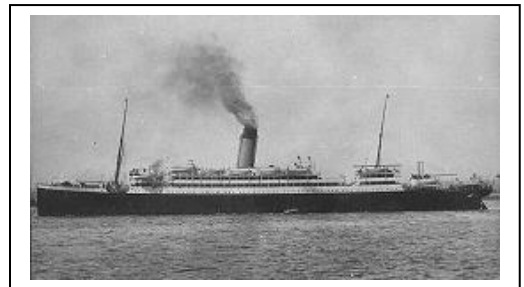
Also at Sheerness was based what appears to have been a second harbour service ship, HMS *Wildfire*. And it was to *Wildfire* the harbour service ship that was transferred Deck Hand Abbott on August 1, a posting that was soon to be amended as he was to be ordered to the armed trawler *Lord Roberts*. It would seem that with this transfer came a large slice of luck.

On October 26 the requisitioned *Lord Roberts* was patrolling in the North Sea in the vicinity of the *Shipwash Lightship* off the Essex coast. Perhaps the crew was unaware that the German submarine UC-11 had also recently paid a visit to the area and had sowed some of its arsenal of mines. *Lord Roberts* struck one of them and was sunk with the loss of nine of its crew of eleven. Two officers survived but it would appear that Deck Hand Abbott had not – no reason seems to have been advanced – been on board his ship on that day.

In the second week of that December of 1916, Deck Hand Abbott was transferred once more, on this occasion across the country to the county of Cornwall, to the coastal town and port of Falmouth and the Naval Base of Dreele Castle. How long he was to serve there is not recorded but it is suggested that at some point he must have been ordered to report to the Naval Base at Lowestoft, there to receive some welcome news.

By this time it would appear that the Naval Authorities had decided that Deck Hand Abbott, after two years *overseas service*, was deserving of a period of furlough back home in Newfoundland. He was not to travel alone as a number of long-serving Reservists was to accompany him on the armed merchant cruiser which was to take them as far as the Canadian port of Halifax: the name of their ship, HMS *Laurentic*.

The ship was to sail from Birkenhead, a port adjacent to Liverpool, on January 23 with a reported four-hundred seventy-five\* persons on board as well as some forty tons of gold with which to buy munitions in North America.



(Right: *The photograph of 'Laurentic', likely seen here in peace-time as no guns are visible on her decks, is from the Naval-History.net web-site*)

*\*While it is recorded that 'Laurentic' was carrying no passengers or troops, it should be remembered that some of those on board were returning home on leave.*

While passing by the north-west coast of Ireland on the morning of January 25, the ship unexpectedly put into the small town of Bunrana in Lough Swilly (*Lough* pronounced as in *Loch Ness*) to put ashore several sick crew-members. At five o'clock on that same afternoon she was under way again.

She then passed through the protective boom at the entrance to Lough Swilly and gathered speed – it was apparently for her speed that she had been chosen to carry the gold as she could out-run most ships and any U-boat. She was barely three kilometres from the coast when she struck two German mines in quick succession and rapidly began to sink; it complicated matters that after the second explosion there was no power on board and thus no distress signals could be sent.

Neither was there much time to lower the life-boats although apparently all on board *Laurentic*, apart from perhaps some engine-room personnel who were already dead, were able to board them. It was to do them little good.

A snow-storm was blowing and most of the men were not clothed to resist it. Any help had to travel the length of the Lough and then through open seas to reach them. Apparently the nearest land could only be reached in the teeth of the gale that was blowing with a temperature reckoned to be at minus twelve degrees, and the boats were filling with water.

And those that eventually managed to land found themselves on the rocky, barren, un-inhabited coast of Donegal.

(Right top and right above: *The Memorial to those who perished on that January 25 of 1916 during the sinking of HMS 'Laurentic'; and the churchyard of St. Mura of the Church of Ireland at Upper Fahan, Ireland, wherein stands the aforesaid Memorial and where many of the dead lie to this day – photographs from 2011*)

Little wonder, perhaps, that of the four-hundred seventy-five on board *Laurentic*, three-hundred fifty-four were to die.

(Right above: *The War Memorial in the community of Bonavista honours the sacrifice of Seaman Maxwell Abbott. – photograph from 2010(?)*)

(continued)



The son of Roger H. Abbott, fisherman, and of Janet Abbott (also found as *Jannet*, née *Mouland*\*) of Bonavista, Newfoundland, he was also brother to Maud-Winnifred, Samuel-Livingstone, Allain-Frayer and to Maggie.

*\*The couple was married in the community of Bonavista on January 5, 1884.*

*(Right: This family memorial\* to the memory of Seaman (Deck Hand) Maxwell Abbott stands in the United Church grounds in Bonavista. – photograph from 2010(?))*

*\*The engraving on the stele shown to the right cites that he managed to reach the shore but was then to be one of the many who would die from exposure. (Although it incorrectly claims that the vessel had been torpedoed.)*

*(Right: The photograph of Seaman Abbott – unfortunately his cap-band is illegible – has been donated to the Canadian Virtual War Memorial, Veterans' Affairs Canada by the Abbott family.)*

Seaman Abbott was recorded as having died\* in the...*sinking of HMS Laurentic*...on January 25 of 1917 at the age of twenty-eight years: date of birth in Bonavista, Newfoundland, January 15, 1895 (from only Seaman Abbott's enlistment papers).

*Seaman (Deck Hand) Abbott served not only in the Royal Naval Reserve but, as seen above, initially in the Newfoundland Reserve, something un-mentioned by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission and other sources.*

Seaman Maxwell Abbott was entitled to the 1914-1915 Star, to the British War Medal (centre) and to the Victory Medal (Inter-Allied War Medal).



The above dossier has been researched, compiled and produced by Alistair Rice. Please email any suggested amendments or content revisions if desired to [criceadam@yahoo.ca](mailto:criceadam@yahoo.ca). Last updated – January 22, 2023.