

BENOIT. J.J.



Seaman James John Benoit, Number 2272x, having no known last resting-place, is commemorated on a bronze beneath the Caribou at the Newfoundland Memorial Park at Beaumont-Hamel.

Having relinquished his occupation, likely that of fisherman, and having then travelled from Stephenville Crossing on the west coast of the Island to St. John's, capital city of the Dominion of Newfoundland, on November 6 of 1916 James John Benoit reported...to duty...at the Naval Reserve training ship, HMS Briton, moored in the harbour (see below).



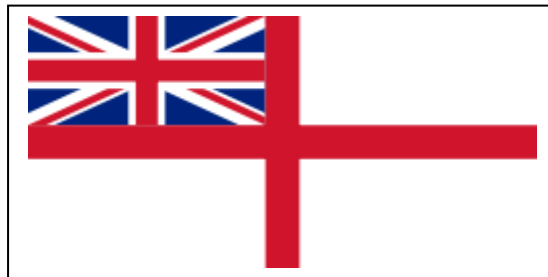
On that same November day he enlisted* for the first time into the Reserve (see further below), was signed on to serve for the...*Duration of the War***...and underwent the required medical assessment on the morrow. He also likely attested at this time, pledging his allegiance to the King-Emperor, George V.

**The Medical officer noted that...‘He speaks English imperfectly’.*

(Right: 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.)



*****At the outset 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.)

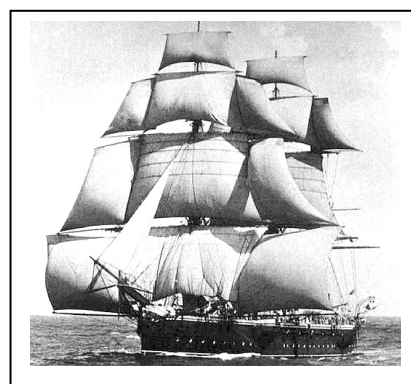
****The Union Flag is commonly referred to as the ‘Union Jack’; this is, in fact, a misnomer since a flag is referred to as a ‘Jack’ only when flown from the bow of a ship.***

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.

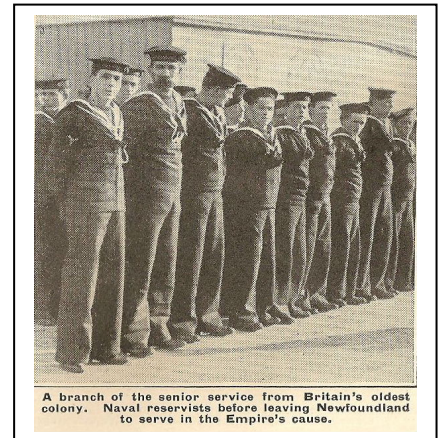


An elderly vessel, HMS ‘Calypso’, having become surplus to the Admiralty's needs, had been provided to the Dominion of Newfoundland by the Royal Navy in 1902 for training purposes. After some debate it was eventually decided that she would be permanently moored in the harbour of the capital, her superstructure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

(Preceding page: HMS 'Calypso' in full sail. She was to be re-commissioned HMS 'Briton' in early 1916 when a new 'Calypso', a modern cruiser, was about to be launched by the Royal Navy. – This photograph, taken of the 'Newfoundland Calypso' by the Royal Navy in 1898, is by courtesy of Admiralty House Museum)

(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 newly-constructed C-Class cruiser 'Calypso' of 1916, seen here on an un-recorded date during the later years of the Great War, was to be sunk by an Italian submarine in 1940. – from Wikipedia)



A branch of the senior service from Britain's oldest colony. Naval reservists before leaving Newfoundland to serve in the Empire's cause.

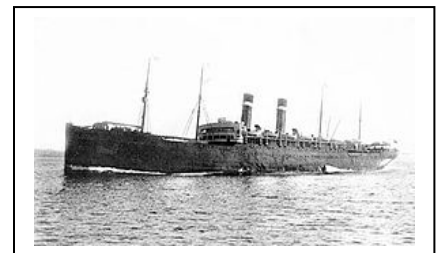
Thirty days later, on December 6 of that same year, Seaman Benoit – as one of a draft of fifty naval reservists and a single Chief Petty Officer - departed Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada, for the United Kingdom. The transport vessel was the SS *Southland* en route from Portland, Maine, to Liverpool – the vessel had previously been called *Vaderland*, a Dutch or Belgian ship whose name had been deemed too Germanic-sounding and which later, in June of 1917, was to be torpedoed and lost while en route from Liverpool to Philadelphia.



Of course, Seaman Benoit's draft had left St. John's for Halifax some days before the SS *Southland* sailed for Liverpool. But ascertaining how the reservists were to journey to there has proved to be more than difficult. There were two reasonable possibilities for a contingent of some fifty persons: by train to Port aux Basques, a ferry-ride across the *Cabot Strait*, and then a train journey once again on to Halifax; or there was the direct passage by ship from St. John's to Halifax – both means of transport necessitating up to three days' travel.

Whichever was to be the case, a revised schedule saw *Southland* leave Halifax three days late, on December 6, and arrive in Liverpool eleven days afterwards, on December 17.

Once having set foot in the United Kingdom, the Naval personnel would have been either posted directly to a ship, ordered to undergo further training or to await a posting, at one of various Royal Navy establishments – these for the most part around the coast of England. In the case of Seaman Benoit, the destination was to be HMS *Pembroke I* at Chatham in the English county of Kent.



(Right above: The photograph of the 'Red Star Line' – later 'White Star-Dominion Line' - ship 'Vaderland' – later 'Southland' – is from the 'Wikipedia' web-site.)

Pembroke I (the establishment had several Divisions) was the base and holding barracks for regular seamen and it was therefore ***Pembroke I*** to which Seaman ***Benoit*** was to be attached.

****There was also a series of ships named 'Pembroke', the last several of which were to be employed as depot ships and for harbour service at Chatham. This is the 'HMS Pembroke' found on the cap-bands of the sailors who served there perhaps in their thousands - but who were never to set eyes on the actual ship in question.***

Naval discipline being distinct in some ways from the laws that governed other parties such as the Army and civilians, sailors had to be on the books of a serving naval vessel to be legally subject to naval law and order, even when these same sailors were serving on land.

Thus the explanation for the often elderly and obsolescent vessels that plied the waters adjacent to the many naval land establishments – also known as 'stone frigates' – and which were in theory the home ships of the above-mentioned numbers of men in naval uniform who laboured ashore.

Which is why Seaman Benoit would have worn an 'HMS Pembroke' cap-band.

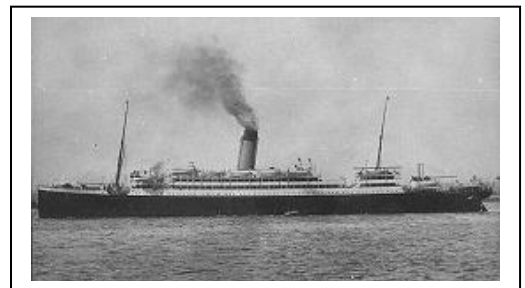
(Right: Some still-impressive buildings of the large Royal Navy complex which was the HMS 'Pembroke' naval establishment at Chatham for just over one hundred years. Today it has been transformed into a university campus. – photograph from 2010)



He was to serve at ***Pembroke I*** for some seven weeks, for some of that time perhaps expecting the summons to report to one of His Majesty's ships. But by January 18 of the New Year, 1917, Seaman Benoit had been disabled by an old injury to his left wrist and the decision had been taken to repatriate him to Newfoundland as ***unfit*** for any future service in the Royal Navy.

Thus by January 23 he had left ***Pembroke I*** and had travelled to the place at which he was to board the armed merchant cruiser which was to carry him homewards: ***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 above: 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 for leave or for repatriation.***

While passing by the north-west coast of Ireland on the morning of January 25, the ship unexpectedly put into the small town of Buncrana in Lough (Lough pronounced as in Loch Ness) Swilly 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; nor after the second explosion was there any power and thus no distress signal could be sent.

There was little 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, a wind 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 above and right: *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.

The son of John Benoit, fisherman, and of Alice Benoit of Stephenville (his enlistment papers, as seen further above, cite *Stephenville Crossing*), Newfoundland, he was also brother to William, Celestin, Matis, Fred, Johanna, Stanley and Mary.



(Preceding page: *The photograph of Seaman Benoit was taken during the period of his service on HMS 'Briton' and is from the Canadian Virtual War Memorial, Veterans' Affairs Canada*).

Seaman Benoit was recorded as having died* in the...*sinking of HMS Laurentic*...on January 25 of 1917 at the age of twenty-seven years: date of birth in Stephenville Crossing, Newfoundland, April 1, 1893 (from only Seaman Benoit's enlistment papers).

Seaman Benoit served only in the Royal Navy and was not in the service of Canada as is cited in some sources, notably the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.

Seaman James John Benoit was entitled to the British War Medal for his overseas service.



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. Last updated – January 22, 2023.