

BERRIGAN, J.T.



Seaman John Thomas Berrigan, Number 1455x, having no known last resting-place, is commemorated on a bronze beneath the Caribou at the Newfoundland Memorial Park at Beaumont-Hamel.

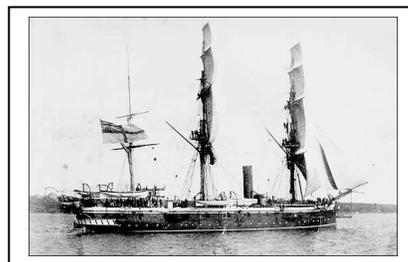
Having decided to *answer the call* of the naval authorities for volunteers, he thereupon travelled from the Southern Shore community of Renews to St. John's, capital city of the Dominion of Newfoundland where, on December 8 of 1914, John Thomas Berrigan reported...*to duty*...on the Naval Reserve training ship, HMS *Calypso*, moored in the harbour (see below).

On that same December day he enlisted into the Reserve (see further below), was signed on to serve for a single year's war-time service* and underwent the required medical assessment. He also likely attested at this time, pledging his allegiance to the King-Emperor, George V.

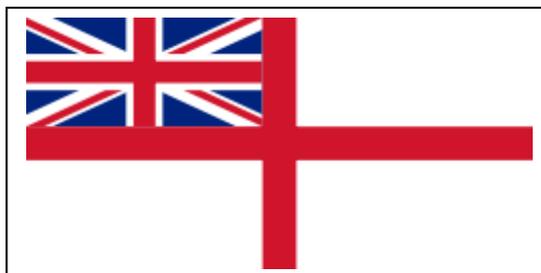
(Right: George V, by the Grace of God, of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland and of the British Dominions beyond the Seas, King, Defender of the Faith, Emperor of India: as a boy and young man he had served in the Royal Navy from 1877 until 1891 and always retained a fondness for the Senior 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.)



(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.**

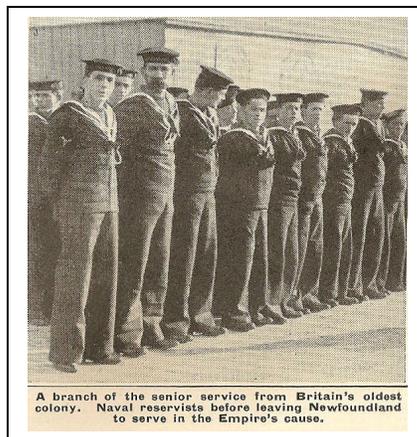
Note: During the years preceding the Great War the only military force on the Island of Newfoundland – apart from a handful of ill-fated local attempts – was to be the Royal Naval Reserve (Newfoundland). Even so, it was to be some thirty years after the withdrawal of British troops from the Dominion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

(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)

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.



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

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

Nine days* after having first reported to Calypso in St. John's, on December 17 – at this point having been promoted from the rank of Seaman Recruit – the now-Seaman Berrigan was one of a draft of one-hundred fifty-three Naval volunteers to board the steamship *Mongolian* in St. John's Harbour for passage across the Atlantic to the United Kingdom. The ship sailed for the Scottish port-city of Glasgow at four o'clock on that same afternoon – apparently un-reported in the local newspapers.



(Right above: Built in 1891 for use by the Allan Line for the transport of emigrants from Europe to North America, 'Mongolian' was a slow vessel with a speed of just twelve knots and was, by 1914, becoming obsolescent. She was nevertheless to be bought in 1914 for use by the Admiralty and remained in service until July 21 of 1918 when she was torpedoed and sunk by U-boat 70 with a loss of thirty-five lives. – photograph from the British Home Child Group International web-site)

**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 waived by 'Royal Proclamation'.*

As seen above, Glasgow was to be Seaman Berrigan's draft's destination. Upon disembarkation the Naval Reserve personnel would thereupon have been either posted directly to a ship, ordered to undergo further training - or simply to await a posting - at one of various Royal Navy establishments – these for the most part in southern England.

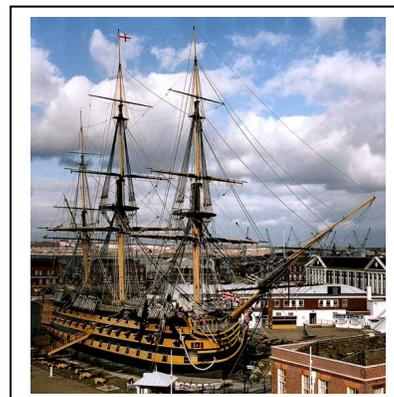
In the case of Seaman Berrigan, the destination was to be HMS *Victory I*, the Royal Navy training establishment and facilities at the south-coast naval port-city of Portsmouth at almost the other end of the country.

HMS 'Victory', like most of the so-called stone-frigates (naval establishments on shore), was three entities: it was a training establishment originally, and also a holding-barracks for seamen not only in training but awaiting a posting, its facilities initially set in the naval city and port of Portsmouth; thirdly, it was also the ship to which the majority of the land-based personnel would have been, at least officially and bureaucratically – if not physically - attached**.*

At Portsmouth this vessel was HMS 'Victory', the warship from which Admiral Nelson had directed the Battle of Trafalgar – although her illustrious history is not limited to that one single incident.

**The large influx of personnel due to the War necessitated further Divisions and functions being transferred to other areas of the United Kingdom.*

(Right: HMS 'Victory' in dry dock in the southern English port-city of Portsmouth where she has been for a century – photograph from Wikipedia)

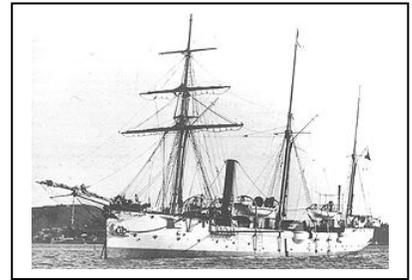


***Naval discipline differed in some ways from civil and even Army law, and those in naval uniform, even though based on land and perhaps never to go to sea, had to be on the books of a real ship for that discipline to be applied. Thus a normally small, obsolescent and obscure vessel – 'Victory' was the exception - was used for this purely bureaucratic purpose.*

Seaman Berrigan was to serve at *Victory I* from the time of his arrival in the United Kingdom until March 31 of the following year, 1915. This was the Division which, as seen above, accommodated seamen until they were summoned to one of His Majesty's ships. And thus it was that on March 31 he was released from *Victory I* and, on the morrow, attached to HMS *Magpie*.

HMS *Magpie* was an elderly craft, a gunboat launched in 1889. In August of 1914, at the onset of the *Great War*, she was to be employed as a boom defence vessel on the River Solent which flows in front of the port-city of Portsmouth before emptying into the English Channel. It was then a body of water of immense strategic importance to the Royal Navy.

Seaman Berrigan was attached to *Magpie*, perhaps or perhaps not to the ship itself as she was to become a depot ship in October of that 1915. This meant that she was to be responsible – administration, supplies and fuelling, personnel, pay etc. - for a number smaller boats, usually hired, bought or requisitioned fishing-vessels, which were employed locally for coastal defence. *Magpie* would also have been the overseer – and the name - of any facilities on land attached to the operation.



(Right above: *The Redbreast-Class gunboat, HMS 'Sparrow', armed with six four-inch guns, was a sister-ship of 'Magpie'. – the photograph is from Wikipedia*)

Wherever he was to serve, it does not appear to have been on any one of those above-mentioned *smaller craft*; however, it was to be an attachment of a fairly long duration: from the first day of April of 1915, until May 1 of the following year, 1916.

He then returned to the nearby *Victory I* – the reason un-recorded – for a brief three weeks before once more being dispatched to HMS *Magpie*.

And once again there is no evidence of Seaman Berrigan having been assigned as a crew-member to any of the attached boats of *Magpie's* brood*. Thus given what now follows, his attachment to HMS *Magpie* at this time may well have been for the most part only bureaucratic. Nonetheless he was to remain on that ship's books for another long period, until June 1 of 1917.

**The medals to which he was entitled at War's end suggest that up until this time – nor until after his return from leave (see below) - he had not served on active service in any theatre of war.*

In fact, during some of this time, Seaman Berrigan had been considered of deserving some furlough back home in Newfoundland. The Evening Telegram of St. John's edition of October 10 of 1916 records him having returned to the capital city on the day before by express train from Port aux Basques* for the period of a month before having been ordered to then report to HMS *Briton* for orders pertaining to his return to the United Kingdom – and to HMS *Magpie*.

**He had possibly sailed from Liverpool on September 27 to reach the port of Québec on October 5, thence by Inter-Continental Railway and ferry-boat as far as Port aux Basques.*

He is also recorded on the passenger list of the SS *Northland* as one of a party of one-hundred twenty-seven Newfoundland Reservists as it was making its way back to the United Kingdom some two months later. The group sailed from Quebec and was documented as having arrived in Liverpool on December 1 of 1916.

Having been officially discharged from *Magpie* months later again on June 1, 1917, Seaman Berrigan was to serve in his next posting, back at *Victory I*, for only June 2, 3 and 4 before being dispatched to the port of Dover and to further service at the naval base there, *Attentive III*.

****The coastal town of Dover lies on that part of the English coast which lies closest to France and the port-town of Calais. The Dover Straits, some thirty kilometres wide, allow vessels from the Baltic sea, from northern Europe and from the North Sea to have access to the English Channel – or ‘La Manche’ as the French call it – and from there the Atlantic Ocean. Today it is the world’s second busiest waterway – and it was already critical to British interests at the time of the Great War.***

Even some seventy years prior to that conflict the British had seen fit in the mid-nineteenth century to construct a harbour for commercial, for cross-Channel and for naval reasons. The port of Dover today is the main maritime link between the United Kingdom and the continent – and the more recently-constructed ‘Chunnel’ (Channel Tunnel) passes almost directly underneath it.



(Right: One of the entrances to the port of Dover as seen from the Dover Straits with, flanking it to the right, the well-known White Cliffs – photograph from 2010)

With the Germans having occupied a part of the Belgian coast almost opposite Dover and with a goodly number of British vessels, both commercial and naval – to which should be added the troop transports which from there and from nearby Folkestone were, by the end of the War, to have carried some five million troops across to the Western Front – using the aforementioned waterway, the British created the ‘Dover Patrol’.



The biggest fear was that the Germans would employ U-boats and torpedo-boats based on the Belgian coast to attack British shipping, and would also set mines in those waters. In fact they did although it was the mines that were to become the greatest threat to shipping.

Thus began the ‘Dover Patrol’. In its early days it was a motley collection of old, even obsolete war-ships, for the most part destroyers, to which was very soon to be added a number of requisitioned and purpose-built small vessels, notably fishing-boats, trawlers and drifters, lightly-armed but capable of mine-sweeping and keeping their German opposite numbers at bay.

(Right above: Armed trawlers of the ‘Dover Patrol’ in the harbour at Dover – The undated photograph is from the ‘Imperial War Museum’ web-site.)

The ‘Dover Patrol’ rapidly became a large and important entity of Britain’s naval defences and vessels from it were to be stationed not only at Dover but at other points around the nearby coast*. Its base came to be known as HMS ‘Attentive’.

****HMS Ceto was another facility at nearby Ramsgate where several Newfoundlanders serving in ships of the Dover Patrol were based.***

The naval facility at Dover was a bit unique, however, with HMS *Attentive*, a light cruiser and armed patrol vessel becoming the base's parent ship* and on January 1, 1916, evolving into *Attentive*, *Attentive II* (land-based office) and *Attentive III*, the last of these apparently still the above-mentioned cruiser – or the also above-mentioned trawler *Seaward Ho* cited in other sources - to which Seaman Berrigan was to be attached in that month of June of 1917.

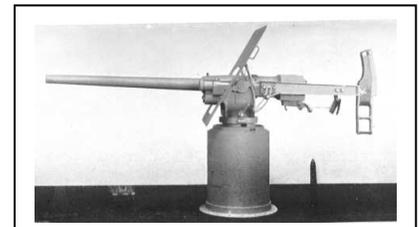
(Right below: HMS 'Attentive', seen here at some time prior to the Great War during which she served as a cruiser of the Dover Patrol. The base reportedly was named after she became the parent ship because her Commanding Officer was to become senior officer of the Dover Patrol itself. – photograph from Wikipedia)

When exactly Seaman Berrigan was to set foot on the deck of His Majesty's Trawler* *Gambri* is not certain, although it could have been as early as June 5. She was one of the flotilla of smaller vessels attached to *Attentive III* at Dover and was a component of the aforesaid *Dover Patrol*.



****During the War, 1456 such vessels were requisitioned from ports around the British Isles and even elsewhere, of which two-hundred sixty-four were to be lost.***

Gambri was a hired trawler which was requisitioned with her crew by the British Admiralty in April of 1917. A new vessel built in 1916 and of two-hundred seventy-four tons, she was armed for war-time service as a minesweeper in the North Sea with a single quick-firing six-pounder gun.



(Right adjacent: A Quick-Firing Hotchkiss 6 pounder gun such as would had been mounted on the fore-deck of the trawler 'Gambri' – from Wikipedia)

(Right: Minelaying from a German surface vessel during the Great War: these were for the most part contact mines. – from the NavWeaps web-site)

The exact dates of his service on board *Gambri* are not to be found among his files but it was at some time during the period of well over seven months from the above-cited June 5, 1917, until January 18 of the following year.



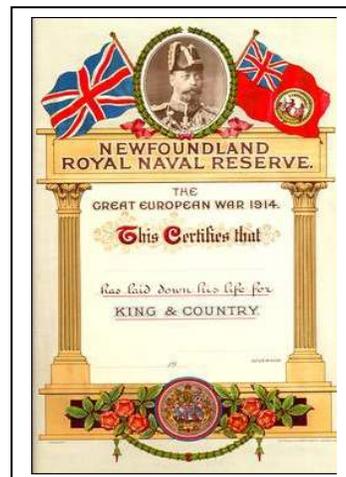
The English south-coast town of Eastbourne overlooks the English Channel and it was there on January 18 of 1918 that HMT *Gambri* was patrolling some eleven kilometres off-shore in the area where the *Royal Sovereign Lightship* from 1875 to 1971 used to warn of the proximity of the *Royal Sovereign Shoal* – it would have been there on the above date.

(Right: The photograph of the 'Royal Sovereign Lightship' on an unreported date is from the 'Eastbourne Herald' newspaper web-site.)



It was not, however, to warn the twenty-one man crew – which included two Newfoundlanders* – of the proximity of an enemy mine that had been laid by the German U-boat 71. There were no survivors of the explosion and the subsequent sinking.

(Right: A Memorial Scroll, a copy of which was distributed to the families of those who had sacrificed their life while serving in the Newfoundland Royal Naval Reserve)



*The other Newfoundland seaman lost on that day was Harold Heber Prince, Number 1973x, of Charleston, Bonavista Bay. His story is soon to be found elsewhere in these files.

The son of Edward Berrigan, fisherman, and of Elizabeth Berrigan (née Sheehan*), of the community of Renews in the District of Ferryland, he was also brother to Edward Joseph, James Joseph, Anastasia, Ellen Joseph, Mary Elizabeth and to Johanna Mary.

*The couple was married in Renews on January 1 of 1886.

Seaman John Thomas Berrigan was recorded as having died, as reported above, on January 18, 1918, in the sinking of HMT Gambri at the reported age of thirty-two years: date of birth in Renews on the Southern Shore, Newfoundland, October 22, 1888 (from Roman Catholic Parish Records), but also October 26 of 1889 (from his enlistment papers).



(Right: The photograph of Seaman John Thomas Berrigan, taken while he was serving at HMS 'Victory I', is from the Canadian Virtual War Memorial, Veterans' Affairs, Canada.)

Seaman Berrigan 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 John Thomas Berrigan was entitled to the British War Medal and to the Victory Medal (Inter-Allied War Medal) (right).



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.