



**Seaman Alex (Alexander) Chalk (found also as *Chaulk*), Service Number 545x, is buried on the Greek island of Limnos (*Lemnos*) in the Portianos Military Cemetery.**

**Having decided to volunteer for the Royal Naval Reserve (Newfoundland), Alex Chalk had originally presented himself for enlistment, and likely underwent a medical assessment, on November 25 of 1908, whereupon he was to commence a first twenty-eight days of training, until December 22 a month later.**

**As with the majority of pre-War volunteers, he had joined-up for five years, a period during which he was contracted to undergo five annual training sessions of twenty-eight days. These were documented as duly undertaken by him, the last being during the months of January and February of 1912.**

**Alex Chalk apparently extended that aforesaid five-year term, to return during January and February of 1914 to undergo a further training course and medical examination.**

**Then of course, later in 1914, the events of the summer of 1914 dictated that Alex Chalk fulfil his obligations.**

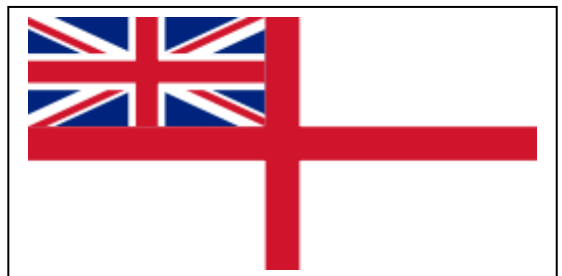
Summoned from home *to service* during the autumn of that same year, Alex Chalk travelled from his family residence in Trinity Bay community of Little Catalina – more likely than not-distant Catalina as cited elsewhere - to St. John's, capital city of the Dominion of Newfoundland where, on the twenty-first day of October of 1914 – some eleven weeks following the British *Declaration of War* – he was yet again to report...*to duty*...to the Naval Reserve training ship, HMS *Calypso*, moored in the harbour (see below).



On that above-mentioned autumn day, Alex Chalk was signed on for war-time service\* and it was likely to have been at this time – if he had not already done so - that he also attested, pledging his allegiance to the King-Emperor, George V.

(Right above: *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 in the uniform of an Admiral of the Fleet is from *the Royal Collection Trust* web-site, 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 at a minimum.

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, H.M.S. '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.

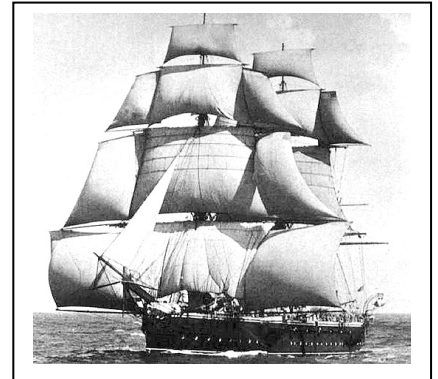
(Right above: H.M.S. 'Calypso' in full sail. She was to be re-named 'Briton' in 1916 when a new 'Calypso', a modern cruiser, was launched by the Royal Navy. – photograph by courtesy of Admiralty House Museum)

Following two weeks and a day of duties in St. John's – no further training has been recorded - Seaman Chalk, one of a draft of three-hundred five naval reservists, embarked on November 5-6 onto the Cunard ocean-liner *Franconia* on its way serving its commercial route from New York to Liverpool.

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

Once having arrived in the port-city of Liverpool on November 11, it appears that several of the men were posted directly to a ship. Others were ordered to undergo further training at various Royal Navy establishments and thus, likely having journeyed by train, reported to these bases only hours later.

(Right above: A relatively new vessel, 'Franconia' had been launched on July 23 of 1910. Remaining un-requisitioned as a troop transport until early 1915, it was to be well over a year later that on 4 October, 1916, while heading for Salonika, she was torpedoed and sunk



*by a German submarine to the east of Malta She was not carrying any troops at the time, but out of her 314 crew members, 12 died. – photograph from Wikipedia)*

Seaman Chalk was to report to HMS *Pembroke*\*, the naval establishment at Chatham on the River Medway, itself a tributary of the better-known River Thames, and in the county of Kent. Not only was it a barracks – it operated from 1878 until 1983 – but it was the name given to a number of training establishments, mostly not far-removed from Chatham, which were numbered according to the purpose of the training – or otherwise - involved.

*Pembroke I* was the training-station and holding-barracks for regular seamen and it was surely *Pembroke I* to which Seaman Chalk would have been attached, there to await a posting to one of His Majesty's ships.

*\*There was also a series of ships named 'Pembroke', the last several of which were used 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.*

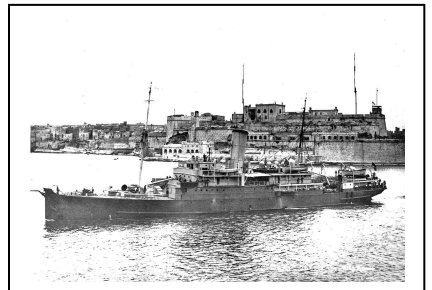
*Naval discipline being distinct in some ways from the laws that governed other parties such as the Army and civilians, sailors had to be on the books of a serving naval vessel to be legally subject to naval law and order, even when these sailors were serving on land.*

*Thus the presence of elderly and obsolescent vessels that plied the waters adjacent to the many naval land establishments which were known as stone frigates. The ships were in theory the home ships of the tens, hundreds, even thousands of men who laboured on shore.*

*(Right: some of the 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)*



Seaman Chalk was to remain on the books of HMS *Pembroke* for two weeks and two days before being transferred on November 29 to a small commercial ship which had been requisitioned on November 14 for war-time service as an armed boarding steamer and transport. On November 30 she was commissioned as His Majesty's Ship *Rowan* and Seaman Chalk joined her complement.



*(Right above: The SS 'Rowan' had been built in 1909 to be seconded by the Admiralty in mid-November of 1914 whereupon she was refitted and armed with small naval guns to play the role of a naval blockade enforcer. – photograph from the [www.clydeships.co.uk](http://www.clydeships.co.uk) web-site via Google)*



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**(Preceding page: A quick-firing naval twelve-pounder (the weight of the shell) and twelve hundred-weight (1200 lbs. the weight of the barrel and breech) gun, here seen adapted for use in 1941. – taken at the Royal Artillery Museum ‘Firepower’, Woolwich, in 2010)**

At this point in her new career, *Rowan* may well have had orders to remain in home waters in order to become accustomed to her new equipment, new personnel and new duties. And if the ship did not remain close to the coast of the United Kingdom, Seaman Chalk *did*, as on January 23 of the New Year, 1915, he became the responsibility – perhaps only on paper – of another Royal Navy shore-based establishment, HMS *Vivid*, a part of the Royal Navy complex at Plymouth-Devonport.



**(Right above: A main gateway to the once-Royal Navy establishment at Plymouth-Devonport – photograph from 2011(?))**

He was to be attached to *Vivid* for only thirteen days before being dispatched for a second time to HMS *Rowan*. On this occasion his time of service was to be appreciably longer. The scant information available of this period suggests that the vessel was soon to be on her way to *Mudros Bay* and Harbour on the Greek island of Lemnos to play a role in the war effort against Turkey and, later, Bulgaria.



In February of 1915 the British and French sent heavy ships into the Dardanelles, the waterway which leads from the Mediterranean to the Black Sea and which passes by Istanbul (the Turkish capital city at that time) on the way\*. The idea was to threaten the capture of Istanbul and thus put Turkey out of the War.

**(Right above: The entrance to ‘the Dardanelles’ which leads, from right to left, to Istanbul and beyond. The picture is taken from the western extremity of the Gallipoli Peninsula and Asia is on the far side of the channel. – photograph from 2011)**

**\*It also physically separates Europe from Asia.**

**(Right: A replica of the historic Turkish Navy mine-layer ‘Nusret’ armed with replica mines on her stern, the ship which in February 1915 sank three Allies battleships and crippled one more as they attempted to force the Dardanelles. She is to be found moored at Çanakkale, close to the narrowest part of the channel. – photograph from 2011)**



The operation was to be a fiasco and what had at first appeared to be a...*walk in the park*...was to eventually be a humiliation for the two Allies who withdrew from the entire operation in the following December and January\*.

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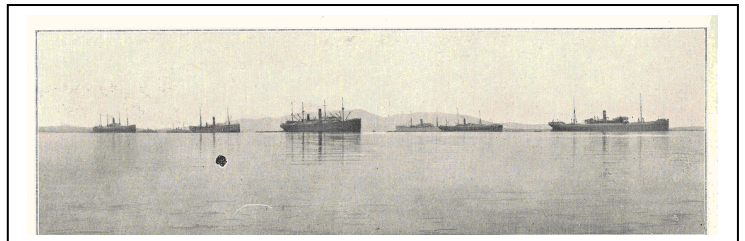
***\*The 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment served at Gallipoli and on two occasions were to act as a rear-guard when the British retired from the Peninsula.***

In the meantime, numbers of small vessels, some of them even sail-boats, were aiding the Turks by transporting the necessary supplies, and ammunition for their artillery. This was at least partially the role for which Rowan and other armed boarding steamers had been conceived. Seaman Chalk's *Rowan* was to operate from the Greek Island of Lemnos of which the Allies had taken possession – even though at the time Greece had been neutral – her base being *Mudros Bay*.



***(Right above: Mudros Bay almost a century after the time of the 'Gallipoli Campaign, but likely also how it appeared in the days prior to the Great War. – photograph from 2011)***

***(Right: Mudros Bay – its tiny harbour seen here full to capacity in 1915 with Allied shipping during the 'Gallipoli Campaign' – was also the base of a great number of medical facilities. – from Illustration)***



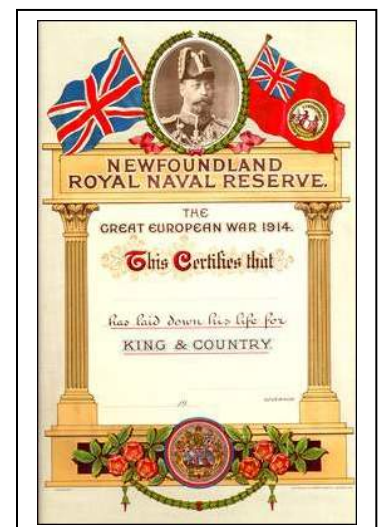
By the spring of 1916 the *Gallipoli Campaign* had come to its ignominious conclusion and many of its combatants had been transferred to the *Western Front*. In the Mediterranean there was by this time a front at Salonika and naval forces had been retained at Mudros Bay and Harbour in support.

The armed boarding steamer *Rowan* was one of those which remained at Mudros, occasionally apparently showing her face and flying the flag at the port also bearing the name *Salonika*. There appears to have been little other than the perils, rigours and routines of war at sea to report.

The Historical R(oyal) F(leet) A(uxiliary) web-site records the death of Ship's Steward's Assistant Alfred Thomas Key having been...*discharged dead...*on April 1 of 1916. The other sailor who died on that day receives no mention in this source. However, the *naval-history.net* web-site (using Royal Navy documents) records the following: *Rowan, armed boarding steamer, both drowned in Greece CHALK, Alexander, Seaman, Newfoundland RNR, X 545 KEY, Alfred T, Ship's Steward's Assistant, M 12463 (Ch)*

There appears to be no further information to be found concerning the incident.

***(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 son of a father whose identity had proved elusive, and of Sara Chalk, of Little Catalina (possibly of *Bird Island Cove*), any further information pertaining to his family has also been difficult to acquire.

Seaman Alex (*Alexander*) Chalk (or *Chaulk*) died on April 1 of 1916, at the *reported* age of thirty-two years. One official report cites death from drowning as the result of a...*boat accident*; the other documents the reason as...*the result of carbolic acid poisoning*: dependent on the circumstances, the two are not incompatible. The date of his birth – likely in Little Catalina - in Newfoundland is given as August 16, 1885, (from Royal Navy Records).

*Seaman Chalk 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 Alex Chalk was entitled to the 1914-1915 Star, as well as to the British War Medal and 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](mailto:criceadam@yahoo.ca). Last updated – January 22, 2023.