



Seaman Ronald Chaulk, Number 2763x, is interred in Saint James' Cemetery in the English Channel town and port of Dover.

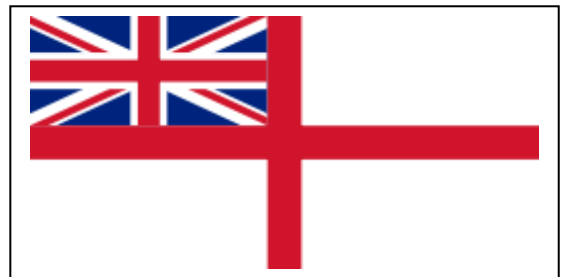
Having decided to *answer the call* of the naval authorities for volunteers, he thereupon travelled from the Trinity Bay community of Elliston (formerly *Bird Island Cove*) to St. John's, capital city of the Dominion of Newfoundland where, on April 15 of 1917, Ronald Chaulk reported...*to duty*...on the Naval Reserve training ship, HMS *Briton*, moored in the harbour (see below).

On that July 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. Ronald Chaulk 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.)

**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.*)

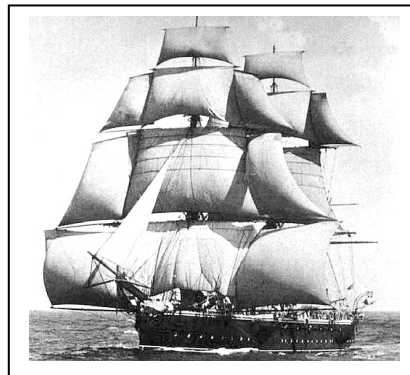
**The Union Flag is commonly referred to as the ‘Union Jack’; this is, in fact, a misnomer since a flag is referred to as a ‘Jack’ only when flown from the bow of a ship.*

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.

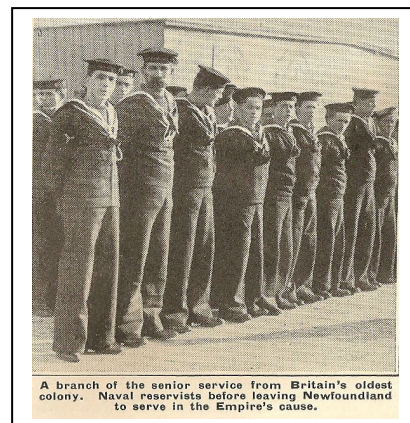
Just fewer than four-hundred men were sought to enroll as seamen – apparently automatically at the rank of Able Seaman - and to present themselves annually in St. John’s for five years in order to train for a period of twenty-eight days per annum. Allowed to report at a time of their own choosing, it 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.



(Right above: HMS 'Calypso' in full sail. She was to be re-named '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 above: Naval reservists from Newfoundland, during the early days of the Great War, before their departure for the United Kingdom - from The War Illustrated)

(Right: 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)



Some eight months following his enlistment, on December 16 of that same year and by this time promoted from the rank of *Recruit*, Seaman Chaulk was discharged from HMS *Briton* to depart for overseas service. On that date he and a draft of Newfoundland Reservists boarded a train for the trans-Island journey to Port aux Basques.

More than twenty-four hours later his naval detachment boarded the *Reid Newfoundland Company* steamer, the *SS Kyle*, to cross the Cabot Strait to North Sydney, Cape Breton, where it arrived at six in the morning. Having then undergone the formalities for entering Canada, the Reservists boarded a further train, ostensibly to travel to the port-city of Halifax and to take ship for the trans-Atlantic passage to the United Kingdom.

The available documents appear not to show what in fact happened next, as the recent *Halifax Explosion* had brought about a great deal of at least temporary change.

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Some eleven days prior to the scheduled arrival of Seaman Chaulk's anticipated arrival in Halifax there had been an accident in the port which had resulted in a detonation which had left the port, the city's downtown area and the railway system for the most part destroyed.

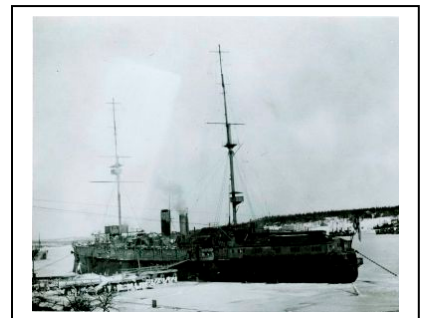
On December 6 two ships, the Norwegian *Imo* and the French *Mont Blanc* collided, as a result of which the *Mont Blanc* caught fire. She was laden with explosives and the subsequent explosion - reportedly the largest man-made explosion in history up until that time - devastated both the port and the city itself. More than seventeen-hundred were killed and nine-thousand hurt.



The down-town and waterside areas of the city were devastated and to add to the misery of the now-homeless, a major winter storm was unleashed upon them on the following day.

(Right above: A view of an obliterated Halifax with its harbour in the distance, the photograph taken two days after the incident. – from 'Wikipedia')

(Right: The Canadian war-ship HMCS 'Niobe' based in Halifax had sent one of its boats to the aid of 'Mont Blanc' before the ship exploded; when she did, all of the boat's crew were killed, as were some of those on board 'Niobe' itself – with several more hurt. 'Niobe' was damaged in the blast but was able to continue her functions in a diminished manner. Several Newfoundland Reservists had been seconded to and were serving on her at this time. – The photograph of a damaged Niobe is from the Canadian War Museum web-site.)



For a while the port had been immobilized, its infrastructure destroyed and it was only gradually that Halifax was to be capable of functioning as a port – or even as a habitable city - once more. And since Montréal and Québec were at the time closing because of the impending winter ice, it was to be Saint John, New Brunswick, through which much of the trans-Atlantic traffic, material and human, was now to flow.

Whether Seaman Chaulk and his Newfoundland comrades-in-arms were to in fact sail as planned from Halifax appears not to have been recorded and neither apparently is the identity of the vessel on which the draft was eventually to leave Canada for the United Kingdom.

But sail he did, and upon his disembarkation Seaman Chaulk was dispatched immediately across the country to service with *Attentive III*, the war-time naval establishment based and operating out of the harbour and town of Dover*.

**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.

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

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



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.

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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.***

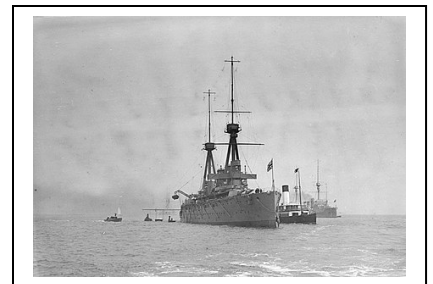
The naval facility at Dover was a bit unique, however, with HMS *Attentive*, a light cruiser and armed patrol vessel becoming the base’s parent ship and on January 1, 1916, evolving into *Attentive*, *Attentive II* (land-based office) and *Attentive III*, the last of these apparently still the above-mentioned cruiser to which Seaman Chaulk was to be attached early in that year of 1918.



(Right above: HMS ‘Attentive’, seen here at some time prior to the Great War during which she served as a cruiser and also Headquarters 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)

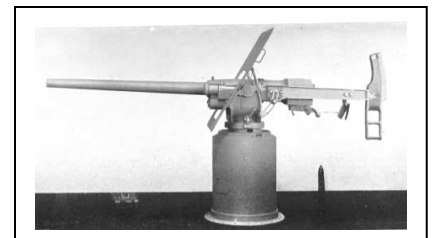
What exactly his duties were to be during the early days of his posting to *Attentive III* does not appear to have been documented in the few scant lines which comprise Seaman Chaulk’s service record. He may have served on the vessel of that name, or perhaps on shore at one of the naval facilities which were a part of HMS *Attentive*.

But on a date undisclosed in his file, he was to join the paddle-steamer *Duchess (of Fife)* which had been requisitioned and converted to serve as a mine-sweeper to take advantage of her high speed, her manoeuvrability and her shallow draught.



(Right: Prior to the Great War, HMS ‘Invincible’ is seen anchored at Spithead with, partially hidden on her port broadside, the passenger paddle steamer and later mine-sweeper, ‘Duchess of Fife’ – from the ‘Wikiwand’ web-site)

The ship had been called into service in May of 1916 to be converted and armed – and her name abbreviated to simply *Duchess* - for use during the remainder of the conflict. Prior to that she had worked, since her construction in 1899, primarily in Scotland as a passenger vessel in and about the *Firth of Clyde*.



(Right above: A Quick-Firing Hotchkiss 6 pounder gun, two of which were mounted on the ‘Duchess’ – from Wikipedia)

She was to be re-requisitioned in the Second World War during which she served throughout in much the same capacity except for the four occasions on which she evacuated British and French troops from the beaches of Dunkirk.

Seaman Chaulk's service on board HMS *Duchess* appears to have offered little more than the everyday routines and rigours of war-time since nothing untoward appears documented on either his record or in the history of the ship itself.

Nor does anything extraordinary appear to be reported about her on July 20, 1918, except for the following: *CHAULK, Ronald, Seaman, Newfoundland RNR, X 2763, Duchess of Fife, 20 July 1918, drowned* (from records of the Royal Navy via the *naval-history.net* web-site)

(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)



Recorded as the son of Elias Chaulk, former fisherman deceased aged seventy-seven years on September 8, 1912, the cause recorded simply as *old age*, and of Ann Maria Chaulk (née *Cole**), he was also documented as the brother of Artellius, George, Alfred, Abel, William, Emily, Sarah-Jane, Bessie, Isabella and also Adelaide.

*The couple had been married in the community of Bonavista on November 16 of 1859, and it may be speculated that they were Ronald Chaulk's grand-parents, particularly as a family source records him as...*Ronald of Bessie**..., she being, as seen above, one of the daughters of Elias and Ann Maria.



*Bessie Chaulk was to marry James Martin, the couple having a son, Enos.

(Right above: The sacrifice of Ronald Chaulk is honoured on the Elliston War Memorial. – photograph from 2014)

Seaman Ronald Chaulk was reported as having...*accidentally drowned*...on that July 20, 1918, while serving with the minesweeper HMS *Duchess*: date of birth at Bird Island Cove (today *Elliston*), Newfoundland, October 26 of 1898.

Seaman Chaulk 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 Ronald Chaulk was entitled to the British War Medal (left) and 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. Last updated – January 22, 2023.