

COPLEY, T.



Seaman Thomas Copley, Number 1162x, having no known last resting place, is commemorated on a bronze beneath the Caribou at the Newfoundland Memorial Park at Beaumont-Hamel.

Having been summoned to service by the naval authorities, Thomas Copley relinquished his work as a fisherman working out of the not-distant Conception Bay community of Bay Roberts, and travelled to St. John's, capital city of the Dominion of Newfoundland where, on August 22 of 1914, he reported...*to duty**...on board the Naval Reserve training ship, HMS *Calypso*, moored in the harbour (see below) and was...*taken on strength*.

Thomas Copley had been one of those to enlist in the Newfoundland Royal Naval Reserve prior to the *Great War*. He had done so on January 5, 1914, and had undergone the requisite medical assessment while at the same time had undergone the required twenty-eight days (see further below) of training. There would have been more as at that time he committed himself to a five-year term of service with the Royal Naval Reserve although it may or may not have been during this period that he also thereupon pledged his allegiance to the King-Emperor, George V.

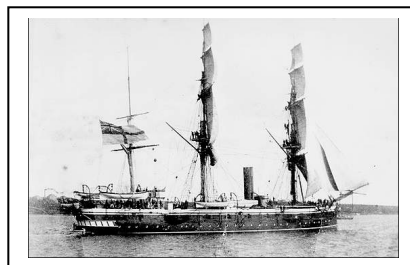


(Preceding page: *George V, by the Grace of God, of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland and of the British Dominions beyond the Seas, King, Defender of the Faith, Emperor of India: as a boy and young man he had served in the Royal Navy from 1877 until 1891 and always retained a fondness for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

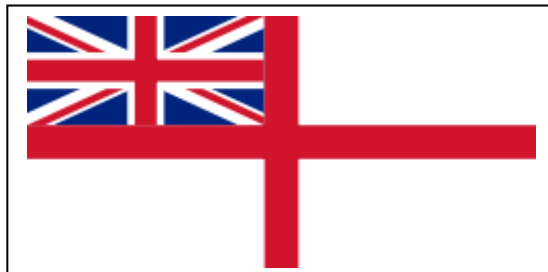
However the events of the summer of 1914 were to intervene and Thomas Copley was to be called upon to fulfil his obligations.

Having returned to his home in February of 1914, only some six months were to pass before the British Declaration of War and the summons to return...*to duty*. This he did, relinquishing his occupation of fisherman and returning to the Naval Reserve training-vessel, HMS *Calypso* – moored in St. John's Harbour – on August 22 of that same 1914

(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 soon 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 (see further below) 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.

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(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 is not clear. – photograph from Newfoundland Provincial

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.



(Right: 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)

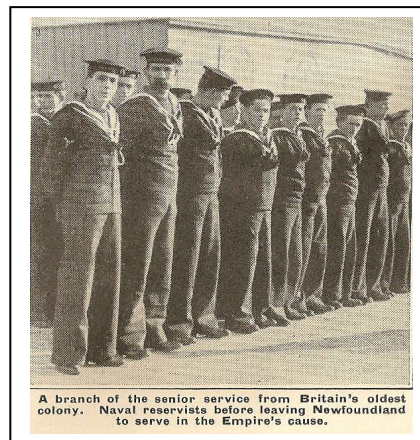


Expenses were apparently defrayed for the most part by the British (Imperial) Government and an attempt was made to ensure the number of recruits would be kept constantly at a maximum. This practice and policy was then to be continued up until the onset of hostilities some twelve years later.

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



Following those afore-mentioned ten weeks spent in St. John's, Seaman Copley, promoted by this time from the rank of seaman recruit and one of a draft of three-hundred nine Naval Reservists and officers, embarked on November 5-6 onto the Cunard ocean-liner

Franconia which had arrived in St. John's having sailed from New York on her trans-Atlantic way to the United Kingdom.

Their ship then having docked in the English port-city of Liverpool on November 12, several of the Reservists were posted directly to a ship. Others were ordered to undergo further training at various Royal Navy establishments and, likely having journeyed by train, reported to these bases on or about November 13.

(Right: 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 U-boat to the east of Malta She was not carrying any troops at the time, but out of her 314 crew members, 12 died. – the photograph is from Wikipedia)



Thus, likely on the aforementioned November 13, Seaman Copley was...*taken on strength*...at HMS *Excellent*, the Royal Navy Gunnery School located on *Whale Island* at the entrance to the harbour at Portsmouth. He was to train there until December 17 when he was ordered to join his ship, HMS *Bayano* in Glasgow, likely destined to man one of the guns with which by that time the ship had been fitted.



(Right adjacent: *The Royal Navy Memorial* which stands on the coast at Portsmouth and from where may be seen '*Whale Island*' – photograph from 1917)

Bayano was a new ship, a smallish six-thousand ton passenger and cargo (particularly, apparently, bananas) vessel, built in 1913, and which was to be requisitioned during the early period of the *Great War* for service as an Armed Merchant Cruiser. To this end *Bayano* was armed with two six-inch guns – six-inches is the calibre – before being ordered into service on November 21 of 1914.

Bayano was to be attached to the 10th Cruiser Squadron, also known as the *Northern Patrol*, a force based at Scapa Flow – although often out of Liverpool - and originally comprising out-of-date warships which, by that January of 1915, unable to cope with the elements, had been replaced by requisitioned ocean-going passenger–cargo ships carrying a few guns at times as elderly as some of the ships on which they were mounted.



(Right above: A six-inch gun such as those mounted on '*Bayano*', although this one has been fitted for coastal defence – photograph from 2010(?) and taken at the Royal Artillery Museum at Woolwich)

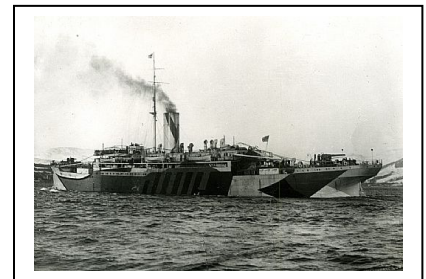
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The ships of the 10th Cruiser Squadron were not spoiling – and certainly not prepared - for a fight. Their job was to form a part of the naval blockade designed to prevent ships carrying goods to Germany from reaching their destination; to accomplish this these vessels had to patrol the stormy waters encompassed by Ireland, northern Scotland and Iceland, a thankless job at the best of times: during the tempestuous winter months, even worse.

Two of the first losses during the War among those Armed Merchant Cruisers were to be vessels of the 10th Cruiser Squadron: *Viknor* was lost on January 13, 1915, taking with her the entire crew of three-hundred two, including twenty-five Newfoundland sailors; only three weeks later *Clan McNaughton* sank and a comparable number of crewmen died, of which twenty-two Newfoundlanders.

Bayano was to be the next.

(Right: *HMS 'Bayano'* is here seen clad in her war-time camouflage dress and with one of those six-inch guns prominent in a forward position. The caption also claims the year to be a rather doubtful 1913 – it cites her as 'coming into service' which, as seen above, was not until 1914. – photograph from Wikipedia)

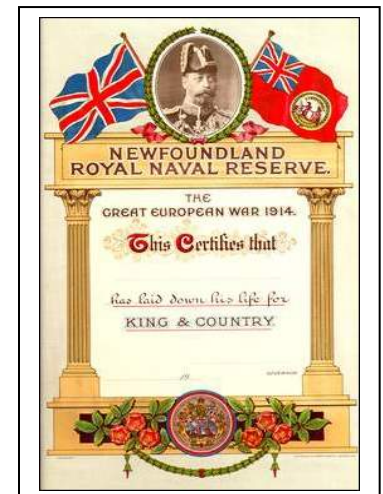


The following is an account of the sinking of *HMS Bayano* and is adapted from a report found on the *Scottish Shipwrecks* web-site:

On 25th February, 1915 the submarine U-27 left Emden in the early morning. It was to be a sortie that would culminate in an attack on HMS Bayano in the Firth of Clyde two weeks later. The submarine passed north around Orkney on February 28, turned south west into the North Atlantic, then west of the Outer Hebrides to arrive in its patrol area in the North Channel on March 3. For the next week the U-boat roamed the area with no success until the morning of March 11 in the Firth of Clyde.*

At that moment Bayano was returning to sea to her patrol duties under the command of Captain Carr with a crew of nearly two hundred and fifty. At 4:50am she was a few miles north of Corsewall Point, Galloway. The night was clear but overcast and dark and the sea calm. Two thirds of the crew were asleep, the third watch being in charge of the vessel steaming through the night.

The U-boat Captain later stated that through the periscope he saw a large commercial steamship steaming out of the Firth with lights dimmed. He was some 300 metres from the ship and fired a single torpedo from his bow tube. The torpedo struck Bayano on the forward quarter and exploded.



Aboard Bayano the explosion flung most of those sleeping from their hammocks, killing many instantly in and around the engine room where the torpedo struck. This first explosion was followed by further detonations in the ship's magazine. The vessel filled with smoke and steam, and water rushed in through holes in her hull. The survivors later

told many stories of heroism aboard at that time : wireless operators remaining at their posts broadcasting SOS messages; the sailor handing out lifejackets to his colleagues as the sea rose around him ; and the captain going down with his ship having organised the evacuation of as many as possible.

(Right above: 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)

Within minutes of the initial explosion Bayano sank by the bow, her stern rising into the air before vanishing in a steamy, smoky cloud. A final explosion heralded her disappearance. The suction caused by the ship sinking dragged down many who had jumped into the sea.

The first vessel to arrive on the scene was the SS 'Castlereagh' of Belfast, its captain later to describe the scene confronting him as a 'sea of corpses in lifejackets'. He stopped his engines but, fearing the return of the same U-boat, then ordered full steam and set off to safely reach port.

Hours later the SS Balmaino also arrived at the scene of the sinking. Its captain, attracted by survivors waving from two of the ship's life-rafts and an upturned lifeboat, stopped to pick up twenty-four survivors.



(Right: The photograph of the SS 'Balmaino' is from The Scottish Shipwrecks web-site.)

Bayano was lost with over two hundred of her crew, including eleven Newfoundland sailors. A second source cites twenty-six survivors, among them Leading Seaman Stephen Keates of Starr's Cove, Twillingate, rescued by the above-cited SS Balmaino.

**On August 19 of that same year, the U-27 was sunk and its crew killed by a British Q-ship in circumstances that in some quarters was considered to be a war-crime. The entire incident was apparently covered up by the British Admiralty.*

The son of George Copley (also found as Coppily), lumberman, and of Jane Ann(e) Copley (née Efford) of the community of Coley's Point, Bay Roberts, Newfoundland, he was likely brother to Thomas-William, to Minnie (Winnie?), and perhaps to Robert.*

**The couple had married in Bay Roberts on October 23, 1887, George having already previously been married. He subsequently having passed away, Jane Ann(e) was later to marry (John?) Snow and would reside in Salmon Cove, Port de Grave.*

Seaman-Gunner Thomas Copley died on March 11, 1915, at the recorded age of twenty-four years: the date of his birth appears to have been December 17 of 1891 in the community of Whitbourne (recorded in the Newfoundland Birth Register for the District of Harbour Grace) - December 22 of the same year is documented on his enlistment papers.

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Seaman Copley 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 Thomas Copley 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. Last updated – January 22, 2023.