



Seaman Francis Thomas Crocker, Number 2226x, is buried in Gillingham (Woodlands) Cemetery: Grave reference Naval. 22. 1173.

(continued)

Having relinquished his occupation, likely as a fisherman, and likely having then travelled from Trout River in the District of St. Barbe to St. John's, capital city of the Dominion of Newfoundland, on October 19 of 1916 Francis Thomas Crocker reported...*to duty...*at the Naval Reserve training ship, HMS *Briton*, moored in the harbour (see below).

On that same October day of 1916, 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 most likely was to attest 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.

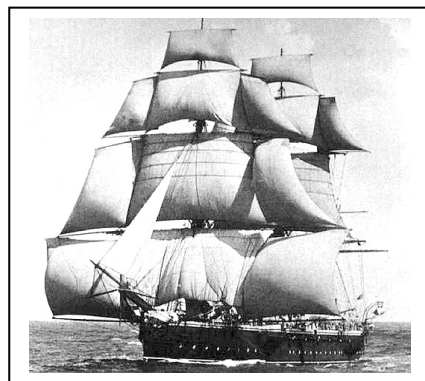
Just fewer than four-hundred men were sought to enroll as seamen – apparently automatically at the rank of Able Seaman - and to present themselves annually in St. John's for five years in order to train for a period of twenty-eight days per annum. Allowed to report at a time of their own choosing, it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

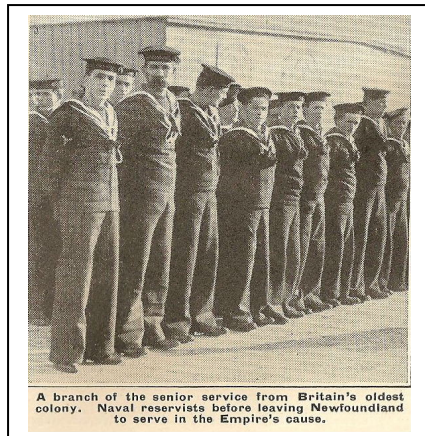
(Right: HMS 'Calypso' is seen here in full sail. The vessel was to be re-commissioned HMS 'Briton' in 1916 when a new 'Calypso', a modern cruiser, was launched by the Royal Navy. – The Royal Navy photograph dated 1898 is by courtesy of the Admiralty House Museum)



Twenty-five days* after having been...taken on strength...at 'Briton', his sparse Service Records suggest that it was on November 14, having by that time been promoted from the rank of Seaman Recruit, that the now-Seaman Crocker was on his way to the United Kingdom.

***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'.**

The Discharge Register of the Royal Naval Reserve (Newfoundland) records that it was on the Reid Company ship, the SS Sagona that he, Seaman Crocker, and the others of his draft were to leave St. John's for the United Kingdom and for overseas service.

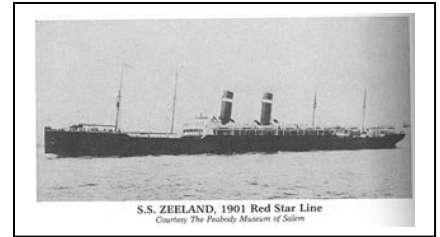


(Right above: Naval reservists from Newfoundland at some time during the early days of the Great War, before their departure for the United Kingdom - from The War Illustrated)

However, local newspapers report that while the vessel was to sail on that date with one-hundred fifty passengers on board, it – and they – were to travel directly by sea only as far as North Sydney* from where the naval reservists were then obliged to travel by the Inter Continental Railway via Halifax to the Canadian port-city of Québec.

***Where the ship was to be for the next while, going back and forth to Port aux Basques.**

Transport to the United Kingdom for the one-hundred twenty-eight Newfoundland naval reservists – although as was often the case, they were identified as Canadians – and their (presumed) officers was to be provided by the *White Star* liner, *Northland*, which had originated its voyage from Montréal and was on its way to Liverpool on England’s north-west coast.



Northland arrived there on December 1 of that 1916.

(Right above: ‘*Northland*’ was originally the Belgian ship ‘*Zeeland*’, but her German-sounding name obliged the war-time British owners to change it to the more expedient ‘*Northland*’. Employed for a while as a troop-ship, in August of 1916 she recommenced her commercial runs, carrying military personnel whenever the situation presented itself. – photograph of a peace-time *Zeeland* in 1906 from Wikipedia)

On December 1 of that 1916, *Northland* having docked in Liverpool, the Naval Reserve personnel would thereupon have been either posted directly to a vessel or ordered to undergo further training – or to simply await a posting to one of His Majesty’s ships - at one of various Royal Navy establishments – these for the most part operating around the coast of England.

In the case of Seaman Crocker, not having immediately been attached to a vessel, *Pembroke I* (see below) was the establishment to which he was directed and where he was to remain until likely the beginning of the third week of February of the New Year, 1916 – although exactly what his occupations, apart from waiting, were to be during this period of wearing a cap-band emblazoned HMS *Pembroke* has not been made clear.

**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.



Seaman Crocker was to remain on the nominal roll of *Pembroke I* until the fifteenth day of February of the following year, 1917, on which date he was transferred to another naval establishment, *President III*.

(continued)

(Preceding page: A part 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)

Even though Seaman Crocker had spent thirteen weeks and a day on *Pembroke I*'s books – this included the days at sea on *Northland* – it would appear that by the time he was transferred to *Pembroke III* he had not set foot on any ship of the Royal Navy. And if the records are to be believed, this was also to be the case during the time – sixty-eight days – that he was to be on the strength of *President III*.

***The service records of Seaman Crocker pertaining to the period encompassing his service of these weeks at both '*Pembroke I*' and '*President III*' include the words 'Demobilized' and 'Remobilized'. In other records they at times suggest that the seaman in question had been granted furlough – usually for a month – at home. However, in the case of Seaman Crocker, any evidence to support this has thus far proved to be more than elusive.**

The last above-mentioned Royal Navy establishment had initially been in London where the original – floating – *President* had been opened to serve as a drill-ship for recruits of the Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve. *President III*, however, not a ship but one of several Divisions to emerge as the *Great War* progressed, was to deal primarily with ships' finances and accountancy, its offices at times located outside the capital city.

Yet there is nothing in the records to show that Seaman Crocker was to serve either in London or at any other part of the *President* complex...or on any ship. In fact, he had been transferred on April 26 to the *Royal Navy Barracks* at Chatham – the home of HMS *Pembroke* – to again likely await a summons to a ship. He was still to be there at the time of his demise.

Seaman Crocker and three other Newfoundland Reservists of *Pembroke I* (see elsewhere among these files) were to be billeted in those barracks at Chatham at a time when there was apparently some over-crowding and so the Drill Hall with its glass roof had been requisitioned for use as a dormitory.

This was now the beginning of the period when the Germans were to send their large *Gotha* bombers over England during the night-time. On the night of September 3-4 the towns of Chatham and Gillingham, both naval communities, were the selected targets, the bombers' job apparently made easy by the absence of a blackout and any anti-aircraft activity.



(Right: This photograph of the glass-covered Drill Hall at the Chatham Royal Naval Barracks in or about 1905 is from the 'campus.medway.ac.uk > history' web-site.)

There were apparently some nine-hundred men accommodated in the above-mentioned Drill Hall at the time. The damage was done by two bombs and by the glass roof transformed into flying projectiles by the explosions.

The sussexhistoryforum.co.uk article from which this present information is drawn cites that ninety men had been killed at the time and that a further forty had been expected to die of wounds in the aftermath.

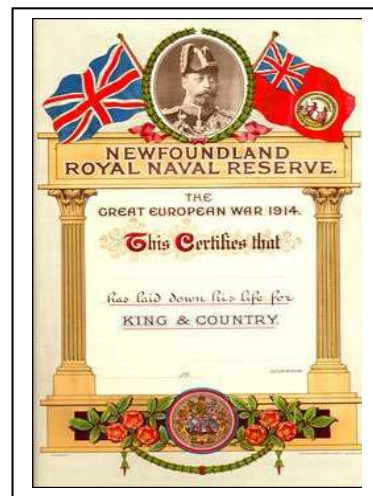
(Right: *The image of the funeral procession of September 6, 1917, is also from the above-noted 'sussexhistoryforum.co.uk.' article.*)



A mass funeral was undertaken on September 6 for the majority of the dead to be interred in *Woodlands Cemetery*, Gillingham, as seen on the first page of this file, with several more later buried once they had been identified.

The son of Job Crocker, fisherman, and of Irene Crocker (née *Compagnon**), of Trout River, St. Barbe District, Newfoundland, he was also brother to Amy, Lancelot, Albert-Edward, James-Henry, Sophia-Catherine, George-Richard, Simeon, Job and to Walter.

(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 couple was married in Bonne Bay on January 11, 1878.*

Seaman Francis Thomas Crocker was reported as having died on September 3, 1917, during the bombing of the *Royal Naval Barracks*, Chatham, as described above: date of birth in Trout River (also found as *Trout River Cove*), Newfoundland, February 3, 1897 (from the Newfoundland Birth Register) but also February 5, 1897 (from Royal Navy Records).

Seaman Crocker 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 Francis Thomas Crocker was entitled to the British War Medal (left) 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.