



Seaman-Gunner John Boone (occasionally found as *Bowen*) Mercer, Number 1034x, the only Newfoundlander from HMS *Viknor* whose body was to be re-covered, is interred in Kilchatten Churchyard on the Scottish island of Colonsay where he shares his grave with an un-known British seaman.

Having received a summons from the naval authorities, he travelled from Bay Roberts to St. John's, capital city of the Dominion of Newfoundland where, on August 24 of 1914, he reported...*to duty*...on the Naval Reserve training ship, HMS *Calypso*, moored in the harbour (see below).

John Boone Mercer is recorded as being an *Old Reservist*, having already enlisted on March 20 of 1913 and successfully undergone the requisite medical assessment two days following. He had also, likely on the same March 20, committed himself to undertake a five-year term of service with the Royal Naval Reserve.

It is not recorded if it was to be during that first occasion of March and April of 1913 or subsequent to it that John Boone Mercer was also to be attested to pledge 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 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.**

**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 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)**

**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, 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.**

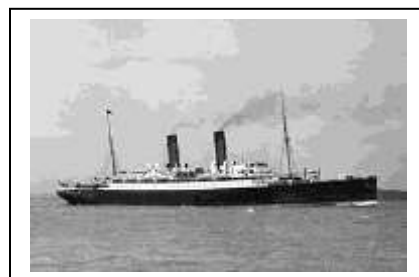


(Preceding page: *H.M.S. 'Calypso' in full sail. She was to be re-named Briton in 1916 when a new 'Calypso', a modern cruiser, was about to be launched by the Royal Navy. – This photograph, taken of her by the Royal Navy, taken in 1898, is by courtesy of Admiralty House Museum)*

Following some ten weeks of training in St. John's, Seaman Mercer, one of a draft of three-hundred five naval reservists, embarked on November 5-6 onto the *Cunard* ocean-liner *Franconia* which, sailing on the return passage of its trans-Atlantic commercial route, after leaving New York, had put into St. John's.

Once having disembarked in the port-city of Liverpool 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 on or about November 15-16.

(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 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)*

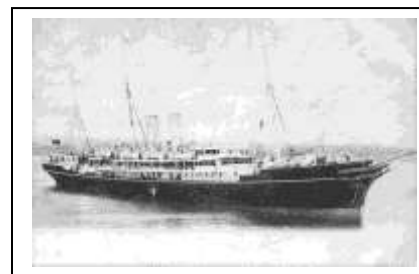


Thus, likely on the aforementioned November 15-16, Seaman Mercer was...*taken on strength...*at HMS *Excellent*, the Royal Navy gunnery school located on *Whale Island* at the entrance to the harbour at Portsmouth. He was to train there until December 11-12 when he was ordered to join his ship, HMS *Viknor*, 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)*

The Armed Merchant Cruiser *Viknor* was an elderly ship, obsolete and apparently under-powered with a top speed of only fourteen knots. In her earlier lives she had firstly been, as of 1888, the SS *Atrato*, before then having been re-named as the SS *Viking* in 1912. Upon the outbreak of the *Great War* in 1914 she had been requisitioned by the British Admiralty and baptized on a third occasion as HMS *Viknor*.



(Right above: *The luxury cruise-liner 'Atrato' seen here in her pre-War condition – from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site)*

(continued)

At the time of Seaman-Gunner Mercer's transfer to *Viknor*, the ship was apparently at the time based on the River Tyne in north-east England. She was not to leave port until December 28 and not to join her squadron (see below) until January 1.

'*Viknor*' was to be attached to the 10<sup>th</sup> Cruiser Squadron, also known as the *Northern Patrol*, a force originally comprised of out-of-date warships which, by that January of 1915, had been replaced by requisitioned ocean-going passenger-liners carrying a few guns as old as the ships on which they were mounted.

The ships of the 10<sup>th</sup> Cruiser Squadron were not spoiling 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 between northern Scotland, the Shetlands and Iceland, a thankless job at the best of times: during the tempestuous winter months, even worse.

In early January the ships of the *Northern Patrol* stopped a Norwegian vessel, the *Bergensfjord*, and transferred a number of persons, one of them a suspected spy, to *Viknor*, she then being ordered to proceed to Liverpool.

From what is known about *Viknor*, she was hardly a vessel fit for the task at hand and January and February of 1915 were to apparently be particularly stormy. What is more, a German counterpart, the steamship *Berlin*, had recently been reported in the area sowing mines – one of which had already sunk the British battleship *Audacious* some three months before.

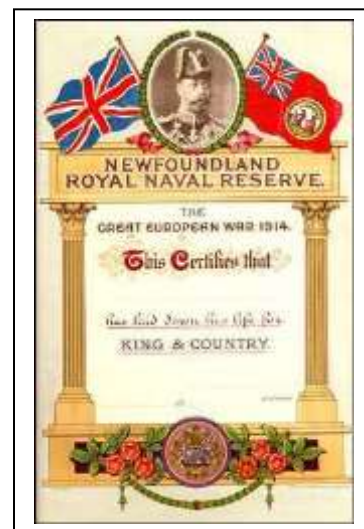
It still remains a bit of a mystery as to what happened to *Viknor* although it appears to be that either she fell victim to the bad weather or that she was sunk by a mine. All that may be said with any great certainty is that there was not to be a single survivor: of the crew of three-hundred two, including twenty-five of the Royal Naval Reserve (Newfoundland), all were to perish\*.

*\*Her wreck was found off the coast of County Donegal, Ireland, in the year 2006, but no firm conclusion was to come about as to the cause of the ship's sinking.*

(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)

The son of Thomas George Mercer, former fisherman and carpenter deceased of epileptic convulsions on October 16, 1900, and of Elizabeth Ann Mercer (née *Boone*\*) of the Conception Bay community of Bay Roberts, he was also brother to Alexander and Rebecca.

*\*The couple had been married in the community of Salmon Cove on July 10 of 1892.*



(Preceding page: *The family memorial to Seaman Mercer which stands in Bay Roberts United Church Cemetery – photograph from 2010*)

(Right: *The War Memorial in the town of Bay Roberts honours the sacrifice of Seaman John Boone Mercer. – photograph from 2011*)

Seaman-Gunner John Boone Mercer died on January 13, 1915, at the *recorded* age of twenty-two years: date of birth in St. John's, Newfoundland, January 9, 1893 (from the Newfoundland Birth Register, where his given names are recorded as *John Boon*, and from his Service Record).

Seaman-Gunner John Boone Mercer was entitled to the 1914-1915 Star, 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](mailto:criceadam@yahoo.ca). Last updated – January 21, 2023.