

PIERCEY, C. A.



Seaman Charles Ambrose Piercey (also found as Pearcey), Number 1000x, having no known last resting-place, is commemorated on a bronze beneath the Caribou in the Newfoundland Memorial Park at Beaumont-Hamel.

Having decided to volunteer for the Royal Naval Reserve (Newfoundland), Charles Ambrose Piercey had originally presented himself for enlistment and a medical assessment on January 3 of 1914, whereupon he was to undergo twenty-eight days of training, until the ultimate day of the same month.



As with the majority of pre-War volunteers, he had joined-up for five years and would likely have undergone the required annual training of twenty-eight days on at least four future occasions during that period. As seen above, however, he completed his first training in January of 1914 before returning to his home only for the events of that summer of 1914 to intervene and to dictate that he return for war-time service.

Summoned from home during that same year of 1914, Charles Ambrose Piercey travelled from his family residence, by that time the Placentia Bay community of Red Harbour, to St. John's, capital city of the Dominion of Newfoundland where, on November 6 of that 1914 – three months after the British *Declaration of War* – he was once again to report...to *duty*...to the Naval Reserve training ship, HMS *Calypso*, moored in the harbour (see below).

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It would have been upon his arrival on board ship that Charles Ambrose Piercey was to sign on for a single year's wartime service* and it would also likely have been at this time – if he had not already done so - that he attested, pledging his allegiance to the King-Emperor.

(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 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.

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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)



(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 only twelve days of duties in St. John's – although no training* is cited in his records - Seaman Piercey, one of a draft of one-hundred forty-nine naval reservists, embarked on November 18-19 onto the Allan Line ocean-liner Carthaginian which was apparently returning on its commercial route from Philadelphia(?) to Glasgow and thereupon took the draft on board. She sailed at nine o'clock in the evening of the 19th, its reservist passengers un-mentioned in the local newspapers.



****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 often waived.***

(Right above: A relatively elderly vessel, 'Carthaginian' had been launched in October of 1884. She apparently remained un-requisitioned as a troop transport during the conflict although this did not prevent her from being sunk by a mine laid by a U-boat off the Irish coast on June 14 of 1917 – happily without any loss of life it may be added. – the un-dated photograph of Carthaginian entering St. John's harbour has been donated to the Maritime History Archive web-site by Captain Harry Stone.)

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Once having disembarked in the United Kingdom it appears that while some few of the men were posted directly to a ship, the majority was ordered directly to undergo further training at various Royal Navy establishments and thus, likely having journeyed by train, reported to these bases on or about November 28-29. Seaman Piercey was apparently one of those immediately dispatched to a ship.

In the case of many of the first Newfoundland Reservists to travel overseas this initial posting was to be HMS *Excellent*, the Royal Navy Gunnery School on *Whale Island* just off Portsmouth Harbour. A goodly number of these *seaman-gunners* was subsequently to be attached to three of His Majesty's Armed Merchant Cruisers which were soon to be lost with a heavy loss of life, many of them from the Royal Naval Reserve (Newfoundland).

(Right below: *Drill on a naval gun on Whale Island during the period of the Great War – from Wikipedia*)

The three aforesaid ships were HMS *Viknor*, HMS *Clan Mc Naughton* and HMS *Bayano*. They were lost – in the above order – in the first three months of 1915, and it had been the third of those vessels, *Bayano*, to which Seaman Piercey had already been attached as seen above, having joined his new ship from *Carthaginian* in Glasgow where she was being refitted and where she was subsequently to be stationed.



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 sailing into and out of Liverpool - and originally comprised of out-of-date warships which, by that January of 1915, had been replaced by requisitioned ocean-going passenger–cargo ships fitted with guns, some as elderly as a number of the venerable ships on which they were mounted.



(Right below: *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*)

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 area of stormy waters encompassed by 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: as seen further above, HMS *Viknor* was lost on January 13, 1915, taking with her the entire crew of three-hundred two, including twenty-five Reservists; only three weeks later HMS *Clan McNaughton* sank and a like number of crewmen died, of which twenty-two Newfoundlanders.



Bayano was to be the next.

(Right above: 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.

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.

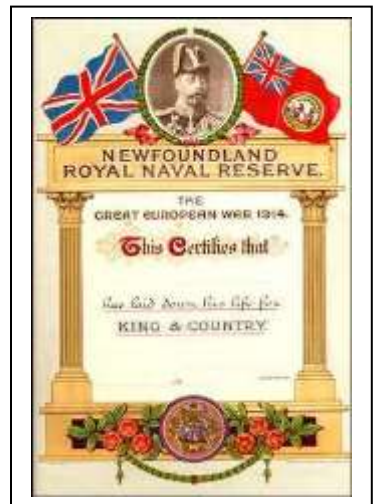


(Right: The photograph of the SS ‘Balmaino’ is from The Scottish Shipwrecks web-site.)

‘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 (458x) of Starr’s Cove, Twillingate, rescued by the 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 Benjamin Piercey, former fisherman deceased of consumption on March 20, 1907 – but recorded as Martha, his wife’s name, by Newfoundland Vital Statistics - and of Martha Piercey (née Hussey) of the Placentia Bay community of Woody Island – before the afore-recorded move to Red Harbour, he was also brother to Hannah-Amelia.*



**The couple had been married on July 29 of 1892. After her Benjamin’s passing, Martha was to marry Charles Peach at Red Harbour in the year 1910.*

(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)

Seaman Charles Ambrose Piercey died on March 11 of 1915, at the reported age of twenty-one years: date of birth on Woody Island, Placentia Bay, Newfoundland, March 2, 1894, (from Royal Navy records as well as the Newfoundland Birth Register).

Seaman Piercey 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 Charles Ambrose Piercey 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*. Last updated – January 21, 2023.