

SIMMONS, E. F.



Seaman Eugene Forsey Simmons, Number 1285x, having no known last resting-place, is commemorated on a bronze beneath the Caribou at the Newfoundland Memorial Park at Beaumont-Hamel.

Having decided to *answer the call* of the naval authorities for volunteers, Eugene Forsey Simmons relinquished his work as a fisherman and was to travel from the town of Whitbourne to St. John's, capital city of the Dominion of Newfoundland, where on November 1 of 1914, he reported...*to duty**...on board the Naval Reserve training ship, HMS *Calypso*, moored in the harbour (see below).

On that same November 1 he enlisted for the first time into the Reserve (see further below), was signed on to serve for a single year's* war-time service and underwent the required medical assessment. Eugene Forsey Simmons 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.*)



(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, 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 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)

Following a mere two weeks and three days of training* in St. John's, Seaman Simmons, 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.



(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.)

**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 oft-times waived.*

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 Simmons was to report to HMS *Pembroke**, the naval establishment at Chatham on the River Medway, itself a tributary of the better-known River Thames, and in the county of Kent. Not only was *Pembroke* a barracks – it operated from 1878 until 1983 – but it was the name given to a number of training establishments, mostly not far-removed from Chatham, which were numbered according to the purpose of the training – or otherwise -involved.

Pembroke I was the training-station and holding-barracks for regular seamen and it thus was surely *Pembroke I* to which Seaman Simmons would have been attached, there to await a posting to one of His Majesty's ships.

**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.



Which is why Seaman Simmons would have worn an HMS 'Pembroke' cap-band – until he joined 'Clan McNaughton'.

(Right above: Buildings 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)

The ship to which Seaman Simmons was ordered on December 10-11 of that same 1914 was HMS *Clan McNaughton*, reportedly at Liverpool on December 4, likely the port from where she was to sail on patrol with the 10th Cruiser Squadron days before that Christmas.

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(Right: *The image of Clan MacNaughton – with unfortunately no further details - is from the Royal Marines History.com web-site.)*



The vessel, a passenger-cargo ship of the *Clan Line*, had been hired by the British on November 19 of that autumn and had been fitted out with eight 4.7 inch naval guns for the purpose of serving as an armed merchant cruiser.

But although a number of Newfoundland reservists had been sent upon arrival in the United Kingdom to train at HMS *Excellent*, the Royal Navy's gunnery school, Seaman Simmons had not been among them and he was posted to *Clan McNaughton* to likely serve as an ordinary seaman.

(Right below: *An example of the naval gun with which Clan McNaughton had been equipped prior to sailing on her war-time duties. – from Wikipedia)*



Clan McNaughton was to be attached to the 10th 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–cargo ships fitted with guns, some as elderly as a number of the venerable ships on which they were mounted.

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 Ireland, northern Scotland, the Shetlands and Iceland, a thankless job at the best of times: during the tempestuous winter months, even worse.

Even so, the first several weeks of her service appear to have been uneventful and *Clan McNaughton* apparently was to return to Liverpool on one if not two occasions before setting out to sea once again on what was to be her last voyage*.

**It appears not to be recorded whether she was in the company of 'Viknor' when that vessel left the Squadron to return to Liverpool in mid-January, not to be seen again before her discovery on the ocean floor almost a century later.*

The weather during that part of the winter of 1914-1915 was apparently foul and the last message from *Clan McNaughton*, sent by radio by her captain on February 3, was that the ship – on patrol off the north coast of Ireland and west of the Hebrides - was in a storm, apparently...*one of the worst 10th Squadron experienced during the whole war.*

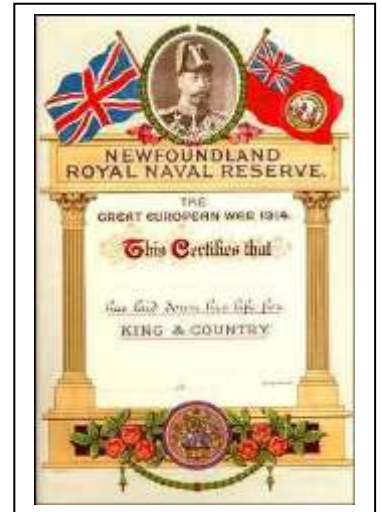
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She was not heard from again.

The cause of her loss has never been ascertained: she may simply have been the victim of the weather as reported by her captain; or perhaps, as originally thought, she had encountered a German mine although apparently the vessel was not particularly close to a mine-field.

A third theory suggests a combination of circumstances: the weather, perhaps a top-heavy ship because of the eight naval guns that she was carrying (just more than two tons per gun), and an inexperienced crew all may have contributed to her loss.

(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 son of Lemuel Henry Simmons (also found as *Simmonds*), lumberman and mill-operator, and of Ann(e) Simmons (née *Pike**, deceased of heart failure on December 10 of 1917) of Whitbourne, Newfoundland, he was also brother to Caroline-Elizabeth, Charlotte-Winnifred, George, Ethel, Hugh-William, Asenath-Mahala, Gertrude-Margaret, Myra and to Harold.

His enlistment papers appear to cite that Eugene Forsey Simmons was married but thus far the author has been unable to find any further details of it.

(Right: *The photograph of Seaman Simmons, taken while he was serving on HMS 'Calypso', is from the Canadian Virtual War Memorial, Veterans' Affairs Canada.*)



*The couple had likely been married in or about 1881 in the area of *Bristol's Hope-Mosquito**, before moving to *Whitbourne* in or about 1888-1889.

After the death of Ann(e), Lemuel Henry married again, to a widow, *Ethel Moores*, in *St. John's* on December 26 of 1918. (Most family information is from *'The Simmons Family in Newfoundland'* web-site.)



**Mosquito* was apparently the original name of *Bristol's Hope*.

(Right above: *The sacrifice of Seaman Simmons is honoured on the War Memorial in the community of Whitbourne. – photograph from 1915(?)*)

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Seaman Simmons died on February 3, 1915, at the *recorded* age of twenty years: date of birth in Whitbourne, Newfoundland, April 14, 1895 (from the Newfoundland Birth Register).

Seaman Simmons served only in the Royal Navy and was not in the service of Canada as recorded elsewhere, notably by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.

Seaman Eugene Forsey Simmons 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 20, 2023.