



Seaman Luke Smith, Service Number 979x, having no known last resting-place (although see further below) is commemorated on a bronze beneath the Caribou at the Newfoundland Memorial Park at Beaumont-Hamel.

Having decided to volunteer for the Royal Naval Reserve (Newfoundland), Luke Smith had initially presented himself for enlistment on March 18 of 1906, whereupon he was to undergo a recorded period of twenty-eight days in training which terminated in the midst of April, the following month. At this time he was assigned the Service Number 233x.



Luke Smith is recorded as having been the five-hundred sixty-sixth volunteer to be registered in the Royal Naval Reserve.

As with the majority of pre-War volunteers, he had joined-up for five years and during the years from 1906 until 1910 was to undergo the required annual training of at least twenty-eight days on four more occasions. Subsequently he was then, in February of 1911, to re-enroll, although it appears that on this second occasion he was to complete but four of the requisite training periods, April and May of 1914 to be his final peace-time visit to HMS *Calypso*, the Naval Reserve Drill-ship.

There was, of course, a reason for this: the events of the summer of 1914 were to dictate that Luke Smith and his fellow Reservists be called upon to fulfil their obligations to the Crown. By that time he had been assigned a second service

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Summoned by *Royal Proclamation* from home to service at the onset of hostilities, Luke Smith travelled from his family residence in Gooseberry Cove, Trinity Bay, to St. John's, capital city of the Dominion of Newfoundland where, on August 3 of 1914 – a single day prior to the British *Declaration of War* – he was once again to report...to duty...to the Naval Reserve training ship, HMS *Calypso*, moored in eastern end of the harbour (see further below).

On that above-mentioned early-August day of 1914, Luke Smith was signed on for war-time service* and it was likely to have been at this moment – if he had not already done so on a previous occasion - that he also attested, pledging his allegiance** to the King-Emperor, George V.

**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*

***Had he done so in 1906 his oath would have been to the preceding monarch, King Edward VII. By the time of Luke Smith's second enrollment, George V had ascended the throne.*



(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 in the uniform of an Admiral of the Fleet is from the Royal Collection Trust web-site, taken in or about 1935.)*

(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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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.

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: 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)

Following some three months of duties in St. John's – in his case no further training has been recorded - Seaman Smith, one of a draft of three-hundred five Naval Reservists, embarked on November 5-6 onto the Cunard ocean-liner Franconia, the ship on the trans-Atlantic British-bound leg of her commercial route between New York and Liverpool.



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

Once having arrived in the port-city of Liverpool on November 11, 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 only hours later.

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



Seaman Smith was not immediately dispatched to a ship, although he soon would be. But at first he was sent to serve until on or about December 5 of the same year at the Royal Naval training establishment of HMS Vivid I* - this Division for ordinary seamen rather than for specialists such as engine-room personnel who were attached to Vivid II, for example - based at Plymouth-Devonport.

(Right below: An imposing main gateway to the once-Royal Navy establishment at Plymouth-Devonport which stands to this day. – photograph from 2011(?))

***'Vivid' was the name of a series of pre-War and, later, post-War training stations – although during the war it was to revert to the role of a shore-base and barracks in the counties of Devon and Cornwall, and at other sites in the United Kingdom. It was also the name of an elderly, obsolescent, vessel to which all of the hundreds, even thousands, of the personnel serving in the myriad stations were attached, officially even if, as in many cases, they were never to set foot on or even see the ship.**



All of this was because of the Naval Discipline Act. The rules and regulations covering the conduct of Royal Navy personnel was unique unto itself, and in order for any sailor to be governed by the Act, he had to be part of a ship's crew. If he were serving on land, he still had to be a member of a ship's crew for the Naval Discipline Act to be in effect.

It was often for this reason only that an old ship and the shore-based establishment shared the same name. In the case of 'Vivid' it was an old gun-boat, originally launched in 1873, which served the purpose, at the same time to be used as a harbour-service vessel.

On the above-mentioned December 5-6, Seaman Smith was to be transferred from Vivid I where he had served on land, to HMS Hilary to serve at sea. December 5 was the day on which his draft from Vivid was reported as having boarded her in the port-city of Liverpool and also the day on which, having been refitted and armed, the vessel was commissioned as one of His Majesty's Ships.



(Right above: The ship in peace-time shown here is the sister-ship of 'Hilary', the SS 'Lanfranc'. She also was requisitioned for war-time employment but in her case it was to serve as a hospital ship. 'Lanfranc' was also torpedoed and sunk by a U-Boat during the conflict, in April of 1917, a month before 'Hilary' herself was to be lost.

Hilary had been built in 1908 as a cargo and passenger-carrying ship for the *Booth Line* to serve commercial routes between Great Britain and South American destinations, some far up the Amazon River. Having been requisitioned soon after the onset of hostilities, she was to be fitted with six six-inch naval guns and two smaller six-pounder weapons and was to sail with a crew – mostly her peace-time complement supplemented by Royal Navy and Royal Naval Reserve personnel – of some two-hundred fifty.

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



HMS *Hilary* came into official service on November 21 of 1914 and first sailed from Liverpool to duty on that December 16. In May of 1917, she was torpedoed while patrolling to the west of the Shetland Islands and the Outer Hebrides by *U-Boat 88* and was sunk with the loss of four of her crew.

(Right: A Quick-Firing Hotchkiss six-pounder gun as was mounted on HMS ‘*Hilary*’. – from Wikipedia)



By the time of her sinking, of course, Seaman Smith was no longer a member of *Hilary*’s crew. But he was to have served on the ship for some two years and several days.

As recorded above, that service had begun during the first week of December, 1914, the first ten days having been spent berthed in Liverpool with the final arrangements being undertaken before *Hilary* was ordered put to sea.

His Majesty’s Armed Merchant Cruiser *Hilary* 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, unable to cope with the elements, by that January of 1915, had been replaced by requisitioned ocean-going passenger–cargo ships carrying a few guns, in some cases as elderly as some of the venerable vessels 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 the stormy waters encompassed by Ireland, northern Scotland, Iceland and the Shetlands, a thankless job at the best of times: during the tempestuous winter months, even worse.

The task of the ships of the 10th Cruiser Squadron (Northern Patrol) was to intercept the ships passing through the waters listed in an above paragraph, be they flying a British or a foreign flag. The ship might be only spoken to, perhaps boarded for inspection, or even sent with a boarding party to report for further scrutiny to a British or Allied port. All vessels were to be treated with suspicion.

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On her first patrol HMS *Hilary* had spent fifty-four days at sea: twenty-six before putting into Glasgow for a week before four weeks' return journey to Birkenhead-Liverpool whereupon she put into port for ten days to re-fuel (coal), draw stores and ammunition, do routine maintenance and cleaning and embark prize-crews for the next round of boarding suspect shipping.

There had been, perhaps unusually, at least four deaths by drowning on the patrol – all accidental – these personnel not to be replaced, of course, until her return to port.

Patrolling was mostly a monotonous routine but apparently necessary – or so thought the *Admiralty* – albeit not very popular among those nations whose commerce was affected. Even though some of the ships stopped were British-owned, this did not afford them any immunity from being questioned and searched and the practice was thus to continue until the year 1917.

During this stormy winter period experienced by Seaman Smith, fifty-one foreign commercial craft had been intercepted, questioned and boarded, three of which had been subsequently ordered under guard to proceed to Kirkwall, a port and the capital of the Orkney Islands, there their cargoes to be examined. There had also been the same formalities performed on ten British merchant and fishing vessels, as well as the sighting, identification of and communication with twenty-one fellow ships of the Royal Navy.

Having sailed from Liverpool in December of 1914, Seaman Smith was then to spend more than five-hundred days at sea on board *Hilary*; the only ports into which the vessel was to put into during all this time were Liverpool just once, on thirteen occasions the city Glasgow on the River Clyde, Scotland, and a further seven times – usually for just three days - into the coaling-station of Busta Voe on an inlet flowing into the Shetland Islands and more or less incommunicado from most places – although its strategic placing allowed the ships of the *Northern Patrol* to spend a great deal more time on the job.

On January 3 of 1917 *Hilary* was back at Glasgow which was when the ship and Seaman Smith were to part company. Apparently his bags were immediately forwarded from the ship to HMS *Pembroke*, a land-based Naval establishment similar to HMS *Vivid* of an earlier page, to which he was at that time to be *officially* attached; but it seems not to have been until January 13 that he or any other personnel followed those bags to *Pembroke*.

HMS *Hilary* sailed from Glasgow on the morrow.

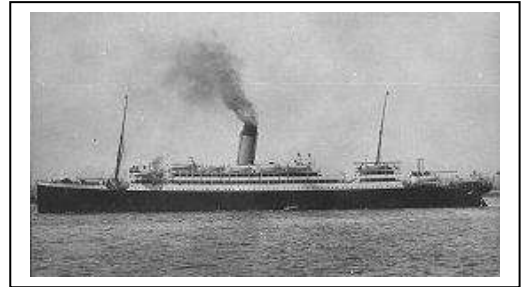
It is not clear that Seaman Smith was in fact to report in person to HMS *Pembroke* as he may have travelled only as far south as Birkenhead-Liverpool since, after two years of service at sea, he had been deemed deserving of a month's leave back in Newfoundland. When the details of passage had been decided, the ship on which he was to journey was to be the armed merchant cruiser, HMS *Laurentic*, which was very soon to sail.

Seaman Smith was not to travel alone: a number of other Newfoundland naval reservists, they having by this time also having served long enough to merit some furlough at home, was to travel with him – likely to Halifax – on the ship.

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Laurentic was to sail from the aforesaid Birkenhead, the port adjacent to Liverpool, on that January 23 with a reported four-hundred seventy-five* persons on board as well as some forty tons of gold with which to buy munitions in North America.

(Right: *The photograph of 'Laurentic', likely seen here in peace-time as no guns are visible on her decks, is from the Naval-History.net web-site*)



**While it is recorded that 'Laurentic' was carrying no passengers or troops, it should be remembered that some of those on board were returning home for leave or for repatriation.*

While passing by the north-west coast of Ireland on the morning of January 25, the ship unexpectedly put into the small town of Buncrana in *Lough* (*Lough* is pronounced as in *Loch Ness*) *Swilly* to put ashore several sick crew-members. At five o'clock on that same afternoon *Laurentic* was under way again.

She then passed through the protective boom at the entrance to *Lough Swilly* and gathered speed – it was apparently for her speed that she had been chosen to carry the gold as she could out-run most ships and any U-boat. She was barely three kilometres from the coast when she struck two German mines in quick succession and rapidly began to sink; after the second explosion there was to be no power and thus no distress signal could be sent.



(Right above and right: *The Memorial to those who perished on that January 25 of 1916 during the sinking of HMS 'Laurentic'; and the churchyard of St. Mura of the Church of Ireland at Upper Fahan, Ireland, wherein stands the aforesaid Memorial and where many remains of the dead lie to this day, some identified, most not – photographs from 2011*)

There was scarcely time to lower the life-boats although apparently all on board *Laurentic*, apart from perhaps some engine-room personnel who were already dead, were able to board them. It was to do them little good.

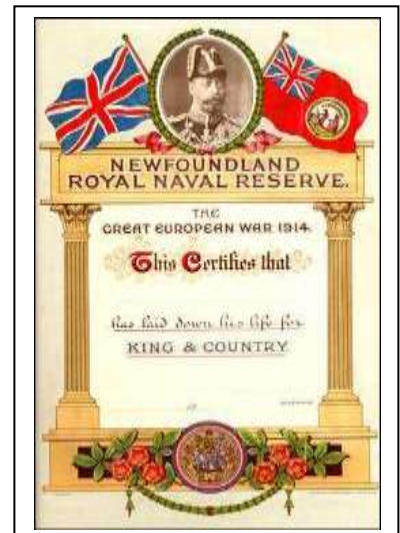


A snow-storm was blowing and most of the men were not clothed to resist it. Any help had to travel the length of the Lough and then through open seas to reach them. Apparently the nearest land could only be reached in the teeth of the gale that was blowing, a wind reckoned to be at minus twelve degrees, and the boats were filling with water.

And those who eventually managed to reach land found themselves isolated on the rocky, barren, un-inhabited coast of Donegal.

Little wonder, perhaps, that of the four-hundred seventy-five of those on board *Laurentic*, three-hundred fifty-four were to subsequently die.

(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 Joseph Smith, former fisherman and lumberman deceased in the community of Heart's Ease on October 19, 1914, of paralysis, and of May (perhaps *Mary*) Martha Smith of Heart's Ease, Newfoundland, he was also brother to Rachel, Moses, George, John, Uriah (known as *Reg*), Benjamin, James and to Alice-Lizzie.

Seaman Luke Smith was also husband of Isabella Butler whom he had married in Heart's Ease on May 16, 1913. The couple was to parent one child, daughter Viola May, born on April 21, 1915, whom Seaman Smith was never to meet.

Seaman Luke Smith was reported as having died in the...*sinking of HMS Laurentic*...on January 25 of 1917 at the age of thirty years: date of birth in Heart's Ease, Newfoundland, August 7 of 1886 (from his enlistment papers and also from the Newfoundland Birth Register).

(Right: The sacrifice of Seaman Luke Smith is honoured on the War Memorial which stands in the grounds of St. Alban the Martyr Anglican Church in the Trinity Bay community of Gooseberry Cove. – photograph from 2022)



Seaman Smith 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 Luke Smith was entitled to the 1914-1915 Star, as well as to the British War Medal (centre) 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 19, 2023.