

SOMERTON H.



Leading Seaman Herbert Somerton, Service Number 720x, 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 volunteer for the Royal Naval Reserve (Newfoundland), Herbert Somerton had initially presented himself for enlistment on January 19 of 1910, whereupon he was to undergo a recorded twenty-eight days of training, terminating on February 15 of that same year.

As with the majority of pre-War volunteers, he had joined-up for five years and was to undergo the required annual training of at least twenty-eight days on five occasions during the following forty-eight months. November and December of 1913 saw his final term of training on *Calypso* before the evolution of events dictated that he was to be called to war-time service.

Summoned from home *to service* at the onset of hostilities, Herbert Somerton made the short journey from his family residence in nearby Portugal Cove to St. John's, capital city of the Dominion of Newfoundland where, on August 4 of 1914 – the date of 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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On that above-mentioned early-August day, Herbert Somerton was signed on for wartime service* and it was likely to have been at this time – if he had not already done so - that he also attested, pledging his allegiance to the King-Emperor.

(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.*)

**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.*)

(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)*



**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 minimal.

(Preceding page: 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.



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

At some time during the period of thirty-two days following his arrival there was confirmation of Herbert Somerton's rank as seaman. As seen above, he had already undergone the mandatory training on five occasions during previous years so what his duties were to be during those several weeks is not certain.

But on September 5 he was to be seconded to the fledgling Royal Canadian Navy and to board the cruiser HMCS *Niobe* which at the time was in St. John's Harbour awaiting a detachment of the Newfoundland Royal Naval Reserve.

(Right: '*Niobe*', seen here in St. John's Harbour, was ceded by Great Britain to Canada on September 6 of 1910 to be the country's main naval vessel on its east coast. Superfluous to Royal Navy needs, she was an elderly...'*1st Class Armoured Diadem Cruiser*'...of eleven-thousand tons, armed with numerous guns, thirty-two altogether, and two torpedo-tubes.



However, by October of 1915 '*Niobe*' was worn out, to be disarmed and relegated to the role of harbour-service and headquarters ship in the harbour at Halifax - see below). – from the collection of William Herbert Rose and Marmaduke Rose (by Courtesy of Bud (Donald Rose) and found in the *For Posterity's sake* – an RCN Historical Project web-site)



(Right above: A naval tender carry Newfoundland Reservists from HMS '*Calypso*' to HMCS '*Niobe*'. – The photograph by *The Evening Telegram* dated September 30, 1914, is from the Provincial Archives.)

**Some sources refer to the ship – in 1914 - as HMS '*Niobe*', but she had already been re-commissioned as HMCS '*Niobe*', on September 6, 1910, for almost four years.*

On the date on which the detachment of just over one-hundred Newfoundland Reservists* was to join the ship's complement, September 5**, HMCS *Niobe* was to officially commence her war-time service.

**They were apparently needed as, when Niobe was being re-fitted and readied for war, many of her crew had been ordered to Canada's west coast and were unavailable when the ship herself had been prepared to sail after her repairs.*

***Some Reservists – including Seaman Somerton - are recorded on their service records as having joined HMCS '*Niobe*' on October 15 but this is highly unlikely as '*Niobe*' had contact with two Royal Navy ships off New York as late as a quarter past six on the evening of October 13 and mid-day of October 16. Moreover, the Discharge Register of HMS '*Calypso*' documents that September 5 was indeed the date on which some of these men joined '*Niobe*' – the records of the others appear to be incomplete in the register.*

*The one hundred names of those Naval Reservists seconded to '*Niobe*' are found in the October 15 edition of at least two local newspapers of the time, but that is all: nowhere is there any further information to be found pertaining to these men.*

*Various other sources cite the vessel leaving Halifax on September 1, 1914, for St. John's, Newfoundland, to embark (Royal) Naval Reservists from there. At fifteen minutes past eight on that September 9, HMCS '*Niobe*' sailed back into Halifax Harbour.*

HMCS *Niobe*'s first duty after having absorbed the Newfoundland Reservists into her crew was on September 10 to 14 to escort the Royal Canadian Regiment during its passage from Halifax to Hamilton, capital city of Bermuda, where it was to become the island's garrison. This mission accomplished, the ship sailed northwards to patrol the waters of the Cabot Strait and the Straits of Belle Isle, a task she shared with a Royal Navy cruiser, HMS *Lancaster*.

Following this episode of but a few weeks, by mid-October of 1914 she was working with the Royal Navy's 4th Cruiser Squadron, also known as *Force 'H'*, which was responsible for the inspection of shipping off the east coast of the United States and as far south as the West Indies.

The United States was a neutral country at the time – she did not join the conflict until April of 1917 – and thus this patrolling and policing of the western Atlantic was the burden of the Royal Navy during the first years of the *Great War*, as was the blockading of German shipping in American harbours. The job involved intercepting merchant ships of all flags, the inspection of cargoes and at times the boarding and the escorting thereof under armed guard of suspect shipping to an Allied – or Associated – port.

This often also involved a great deal of boredom with the exception, perhaps, of the few days – every three weeks or so – when the patrol ships put into Halifax or, less often, Bermuda for re-fuelling and the replenishment of other supplies.

HMCS *Niobe* was already an elderly ship and the continuous effort of those several months resulted in an elderly *worn-out* ship. Thus when she returned to Halifax in July of 1915, it was decided that she should remain there to become a depot ship and headquarters for the other, smaller, ships of the Royal Canadian Navy on Canada's east coast. She was to remain in Halifax for the remainder of the conflict.

The Newfoundlanders of the Royal Naval Reserve were then to return to St. John's to serve on HMS *Calypso*, some for only a short period of duty, before being dispatched overseas to the United Kingdom and thence to ships of the Royal Navy.

Seaman Somerton's Service Record shows that he was put back on the nominal roll of HMS *Calypso* on September 1 of 1915 – although this may have been partially only on paper. Some three weeks later he was on his way once more.

He was a seaman of the draft of one-hundred forty-four Royal Navy Reserve personnel which was to travel across the island of Newfoundland to Port-aux-Basques likely overnight on September 23-24, 1915. The detachment then embarked on the Reid Newfoundland vessel, the SS *Kyle*, for passage to North Sydney where the ship docked on the morrow, September 25, at ten minutes past five in the morning.



(Right: *The SS Kyle, an important element of Newfoundland's history, is seen here beached at the western extreme of the harbour in Harbour Grace. –photograph from 2012*)

From there the Reservists were to travel by the *Inter-Continental Railway* to Québec City where they would be taken on board the SS *Sicilian* arriving from Montreal on her commercial route across the Atlantic to Liverpool.

(Right: *The image of the SS Sicilian at anchor(?) just off-shore is from the WikiTree web-site.*)

It was likely at the end of the first week of October, 1915, and having disembarked in the afore-mentioned English port-city, that the Naval Reservists would thereupon have been either dispatched directly to a vessel or ordered to undergo further training – or otherwise 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 Somerton, 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 almost the end of the fourth week of November of that year – 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.

(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*)

Following some two months’ service at HMS *Pembroke* – apparently what exactly that service entailed has not been recorded – Seaman Somerton (perhaps already Leading Seaman Somerton by that time) had been transferred...to duty...with HMS *Jupiter*, an elderly *Majestic-class* battleship.



(Preceding page: *The photograph of HMS 'Jupiter' is from the 'Wikipedia' web-site. Having spent an uneventful War, she was sold for scrap in January of 1920.*)

She had been built in 1895 but was soon to be eclipsed by the advent of the *Dreadnought-Class* warship in speed, weaponry and armour. Much of her war-time service was to be spent as a guard-ship, an accommodation ship, a depot-ship and even as an ice-breaker. It would seem that she was never to fire her guns in anger.

(Leading) Seaman Somerton likely joined HMS *Jupiter* while she was at Aden on the south coast of the Arabian Peninsula although the exact date has not been recorded. The next months were to be spent patrolling the Gulf of Aden, the Red Sea and the length of the Suez Canal. Monotonous though this may have proved, the accessibility and security of these water-ways was critical to the British war effort.

(Right: *The community of Port Tewfiq at the south end of the Suez Canal at a time just prior to the Great War – from a vintage post-card*)



From south to north, Leading Seaman Somerton and HMS *Jupiter* visited the following ports: Aden, Shukra (today *Shuqrah*), Port Sudan (today *Soudan*), Abu Zenima, Port Tewfok (also found as *Tewfiq*), Port Suez, the Bitter Lakes, Ismalia and Port Saïd. Her mission complete, at the beginning of November of 1916 she sailed from the last-named port – at the northern end of the Suez Canal – for Plymouth-Devonport, England, but stopping in at Crete, Malta and Gibraltar while en route.



(Right: *Port Saïd at or about the time of the Great War – from a vintage post-card*)

The ship arrived at its destination on December 18, next four days putting her in order. It had been her last mission as a fighting ship and she was now to be used only as an accommodation vessel. Her crew was paid off and she was decommissioned.



(Right above: *One of the several now-abandoned British hospital buildings, facilities which today stand empty and decaying, since independence in 1964, on the Mediterranean island of Malta – photograph from 2011*)

(Right: *The British Crown Colony of Gibraltar in pre-Great War days: The Spanish mainland is in the background beyond the harbour and Royal Navy dockyard. – from a vintage postcard*)



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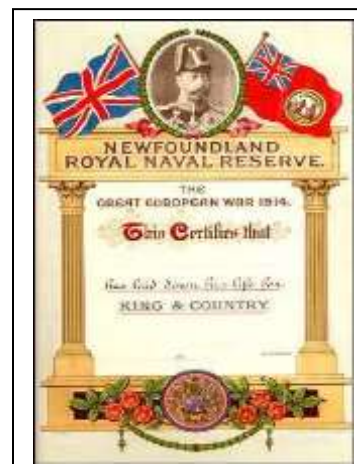
(Leading) Seaman Somerton, at seven-thirty in the evening of December 22, was discharged and he and other ratings such as he who had joined the ship from HMS *Pembroke* were ordered to report back there.



He was not to remain there for very long at all: on February 13 of the New Year, 1917, he was dispatched to a further shore-based Naval facility, *President III*. It was likely a holding-barracks where seaman were now to await a posting.

(Right above: *The photograph of the SS 'Portloe' taken in 1912 is from the National Museums Liverpool web-site.*)

The SS *Portloe*, built in 1912, was a small commercial steamer of some three-thousand two-hundred tons. On the day of her loss she had been returning from a port (*Bougie* or *Bugia* if one uses the Roman alphabet) in eastern Algeria; thus (Leading) Seaman Somerton had likely been on her for at least two weeks.



(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*)

She was on her way with a cargo of phosphate to Scotland when on April 20, 1917, she was attacked – presumably torpedoed – and sunk some two-hundred kilometres to the west of Ireland. Twenty-four lives were lost.



(Right: *The sacrifice of Leading Seaman Herbert Somerton is honoured on the War Memorial which stands in the community of Portugal Cove. – photograph from 2010(?)*)

The son of Matthew Somerton, fisherman, and of Maria Somerton (née *Miller**) of Portugal Cove, District of St. John's East, he was also brother to Andrew and to Laura.

**The couple was married in the community of Portugal Cove on December 14 of 1980.*

Leading Seaman Herbert Somerton is documented as having drowned on April 20, 1917, in the loss of the ship *Portloe* at the reported age of twenty-seven years: the date of his birth in Portugal Cove, Conception Bay, Newfoundland, April 20, 1890, from Royal Naval Records.



(Right: *This memorial to the memory of Herbert Somerton stands in the Anglican Cemetery in the community of Portugal Cove. – photograph from 2022*)

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Leading Seaman Somerton served only in the Royal Navy and was not in the service of Canada – only seconded to ‘Niobe’ by the Royal Navy - as is cited in some sources notably the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.

Leading Seaman Herbert Somerton 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. Last updated – January 20, 2023.