



Seaman Stephen Sparkes (also found as *Sparks*), Number 1538x, 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, he thereupon travelled from the not-distant District of Port de Grave to St. John's*, capital city of the Dominion of Newfoundland where, on January 11 of 1915, Stephen Sparkes reported...*to duty*...on the Naval Reserve training ship, HMS *Calypso*, moored in the harbour (see below).

**Some sources have him already in St. John's at the time.*

On that January 11 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. Stephen Sparkes 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.



A branch of the senior service from Britain's oldest colony. Naval reservists before leaving Newfoundland to serve in the Empire's cause.

(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.



(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 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)

Twenty-three or twenty-four days* after having first reported to *Calypso* in St. John's, on February 4 Seaman Recruit Sparkes was apparently promoted to the rank of Seaman; it would then appear that on the same February 4 of that 1915, he was to depart from St. John's to cross the Atlantic – this suggested by the dates documented in his sparse service file.

****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 waived by 'Royal Proclamation'.***

On that date, the detachment of volunteers for the Army that upon its arrival at Edinburgh Castle was to become 'C' Company of the Newfoundland contingent in the United Kingdom, boarded the tender *Neptune* in St. John's Harbour for the short journey down the coast to Bay Bulls. There the ocean-going vessel *Dominion* awaited to carry it across the Atlantic and it might be assumed that the Naval Reservists were to be a part of that contingent.

(Right: *The photograph of personnel of 'C' Company on board the 'Neptune' on the way to the harbour at Bay Bulls is from the Provincial Archives.*)



The available sources do not, however, record any Newfoundland naval reservists taking passage on *Dominion*. In fact, *Calypso's* drill register of the time records that the personnel were to leave St. John's on board the *Allan Line* vessel, the SS *Mongolian*, on February 17 – although the ship's captain records (see below) that it was the 18th.

The situation seems to have been a bit more complicated than that: Days before, according to the local newspapers, on that February 4-5, *Mongolian* had left St. John's to attempt to force a passage through the heavy ice surrounding the entrance to St. John's and extending well offshore. It was to no avail and after three days of futile effort the ship returned to port.

In re-entering St. John's Harbour, however, the vessel struck a rock and, after inspection, it was decided necessary to do emergency repairs in the local dock. In the meantime some of the vessel's passengers were to take the train across the island so as to catch another ship in Halifax.

On or about February 23, the repairs having been completed, *Mongolian* departed Newfoundland once again, only to be immediately met with heavy seas which eventually were to at least partially undo much of the temporary work which had been completed to the ship only days before.

The following is an adaption of a letter written by *Mongolian's* captain after his ship had reached the safety of the harbour of Halifax on February 25. It was addressed to Lieutenant-Commander of HMS *Calypso* who saw fit to forward it to the Office of the Colonial Secretary – whence it made its way to the local press.

Dear Sir:-

It is but just that I submit the following to your notice.

As you are aware, the ship under my command left St. John's 18th February with 200 R.N.R. ratings from your ship under the command of Captain Alan Goodridge. On their arrival on board '*Mongolian*' Captain Goodridge at once established regular discipline and routine.

Shortly after leaving port rough and foggy weather was encountered and as ship proceeded East this weather became worse each day. On 22nd and 23rd a heavy gale raged from North-East with very high seas, causing the ship to labour considerably. On the latter date trouble arose through the giving-out of temporary repairs done in St. John's. Considerable water was found making its way into the fore end of the ship. After consultation I decided to return here to Halifax.

I requested Captain Goodridge with ratings under his command to assist me in every way consistent with requirements. It is needless to say such help was given in the most energetic and cheerful manner by way of preparing for any emergency. Manning deck pumps (which were kept going day and night until arrival into port). Also a number of men were detailed to assist in the engine room and stokehold. (Chief Engineer Brown of this ship desires me to specially mention the valuable assistance of these men.

For my part I cannot speak too highly of Captain Goodridge. His cheerful and composed manner throughout went far to inspire confidence not only in the men under his command but also the passengers entrusted to my care.

I would request, Sir, that you would be good enough to forward to His Excellency the Governor my appreciation for the assistance so ably rendered by him. I would also ask you to place on record my high opinion of Petty Officer George Gill and Armourer Luxon.

The entire staff of my ship join with me in thanking the men of the Newfoundland Reserve whose conduct throughout was most exemplary and helpful in every way.

I may say that almost immediately upon arrival here the men were transferred to the SS 'Scandinavian' and sailed about 9 p.m..

J.W. Hatherly
Master S.S. Mongolian

(Right: The SS 'Mongolian' was an elderly vessel constructed in 1891. Built for the Allan Line Company she was to have served as a troopship during the Boer War before being bought by the British Admiralty, again for war service, in 1914 or 1915. She was not to survive the conflict: on July 21 of 1918 she was torpedoed and sunk by U-boat 70 with a loss of thirty-five lives. – The photograph of Mongolian is from the British Home Child Group International web-site.)



SS Mongolian

Once having disembarked from *Scandinavian* (see in letter above) in the United Kingdom in early March any Naval personnel would have been either posted directly to a ship or ordered to undergo further training at one of various Royal Navy establishments – these for the most part in England.

Seaman Sparkes was dispatched on to report to HMS *Pembroke I**, 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 Sparkes 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 elderly and obsolescent vessels that plied the waters adjacent to the many naval land establishments – and known as stone frigates – were in theory the home ships of the tens, hundreds, thousands of men who laboured ashore.



Which is why Seaman Sparkes would have worn an HMS 'Pembroke' cap-band.

(Right above: Some 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)

Seaman Sparkes was to serve ten weeks less two days at *Pembroke I*. On April 14 he was taken off *Pembroke's* strength and four days afterwards – did he enjoy a few days of furlough, perhaps in nearby London? – reported to HMS *Ceto*, the base in the coastal town of Ramsgate – further down the Thames from Chatham - from which operated some of the ships of the *Dover Patrol*.

Prior to the *Great War*, Ramsgate had been a popular seaside destination and it had also been a thriving fishing centre, both of which had suffered hugely because of German U-boat activity, mine-laying and, later, bombing raids. It was in order to counter the submarines and mines that the Admiralty created the *Dover Patrol* for which it requisitioned a number of fishing-boats, drifters and tugs, armed them, and placed Navy personnel on board.



(Right above: Drifters and other small vessels lined up at the quay-side of Ramsgate Harbour during the early days of the Great War – from the Imperial War Museum web-site...livesofthefirstworldwar.iwm.org.uk)

(continued)

Thus HMS *Ceto* came into being at Ramsgate, a base where Seaman Sparkes was to be...*taken on strength*...on April 18 of 1915.

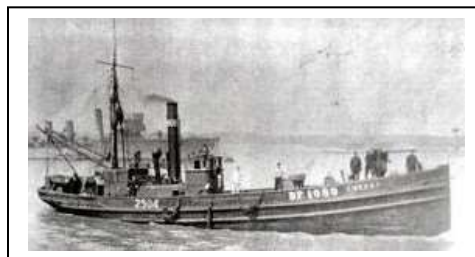
At some point after having reported to HMS *Ceto*, Seaman Sparkes was to change cap-bands once more when he became a crew-member of a drifter, HMS *Frons Olivae*, a vessel at times engaged in the search for and the destruction of enemy mines.

(Right: *Minelaying from a German surface vessel during the Great War: these were for the most part contact mines. U-boats were also used for this purpose – from the NavWeaps web-site*)



There was nothing particularly conspicuous about *Frons Olivae*. Perhaps constructed mainly of wood, she was just another hired drifter, Admiralty Number A, 1289. She had been built in 1912, weighed some ninety-five tons and had been registered as YH.217. in the fishing town of Yarmouth further up the coast. No longer simply a fishing-boat, she was to carry armament comprising a single three-pounder gun.

(Right: *The Royal Navy Drifter 'Cheery' of the same class as 'Frons Olivae' which was to survive the conflict, the photograph showing a small gun mounted on her fore-deck – photograph from Wikipedia*)



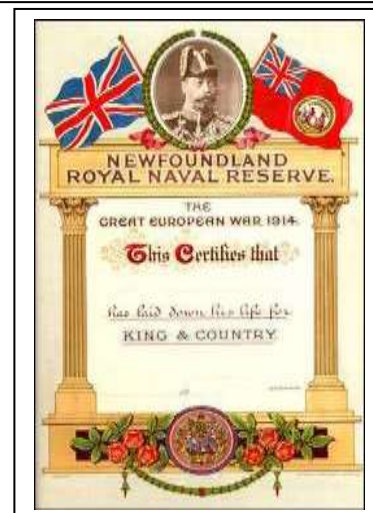
(Right below: *A photographic example of the type of afore-mentioned 3 pounder gun as possibly mounted on Frons Olivae – from Wikipedia*)



There appears to be no account of Seaman Sparkes and his ship on their last mission off Ramsgate together – it may be no surprise than no log-book is available. We do not know even if she was merely on patrol or mine-clearing – or both – on that December 12 of 1915. It is recorded, however, that she was the victim of a mine set by U-5 (*U-boat-5*) near to what was known as the *Elbow Buoy*.

In the early days of the War, one of the most rudimentary methods of disposing with mines was to explode it by rifle-fire, at times a dangerous practice. Whether the concussion of an exploding mine detonated another closer to the vessel or whether *Frons Olivae* came into physical contact with one of them appears not to be known – nor of course was there any survivor to tell the tale.

The son of Reuben Sparkes, fisherman, and of Fannie Sparkes (née *Reid**) of the Conception Bay community of Georgetown, Brigus, Newfoundland, he was also brother to Mary-Emma, Rosanna, William-Henry, Ambrose and to Albert-G..



****The couple had been married at the Methodist Parsonage on Hamilton Avenue in St. John's on March 25 of 1890.***

(Preceding page: A Memorial Scroll, a copy of which was distributed to the families of those who had sacrificed their life while in the Newfoundland Royal Naval Reserve)

Seaman Stephen Sparkes was to die on October 12 of 1915 at sea in the sinking of the *Frons Olivae* at the reported age of twenty-two years: date of birth in Cupids, Newfoundland, July 7, 1893 (from the Newfoundland Birth Register) and also found as July 20 of the same year (from Royal Navy Records and his own enlistment papers).



(Right above: The sacrifice of Seaman Stephen Sparkes is honoured on the War Memorial in the community of Brigus. – photograph from 2010(?))s

Seaman Sparkes 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 Stephen Sparkes 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.